

*Critical Reading of
'The Road from Colonus'
in the Light of Reader-Response Criticism*

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*T*his article is fully devoted to the critical reading of the short story written by E. M. Forster in the light of the Reader-Response Criticism. This critical reading approach is reader-centred and EFL setting-friendly, because the reader as the learner of L2, namely English, can find ample opportunity to improve his/her language skills while s/he develops literary competence and intellectual performance by simply following the steps proposed by the approach concerned. At the end of the reading process the reader will also be able to see how the text solely existing on the page(s) turns into a work of art once it goes through the mind and heart of the reader.

Keywords: text, work of art, reader-response criticism, EFL setting, literary competence

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*R*eaders Response Criticism is a reader-centred critical reading approach focusing on how readers grasp what the author communicates across through his own writing—the literary text. This text exists as a piece of writing until a reader with literary competence and highly critical mind reads and interprets it from his own perspective. In Reader Response Criticism the fundamental principle is that there is no such text as a literary work of art until it is being read, interpreted and criticised accordingly, because “The text becomes a work when it is read just as a score becomes music when it is played” (Beaty, 1996, p. 763). What the author puts into his work cannot be more than what the reader understands by the text. Logical interpretation of the work totally depends on how well the reader has already understood the text and his cultural and social background. Writing a text by encoding ideas into words and decoding it into ideas that the author has probably expressed through his own words are completely two different intellectual acts. This approach “postulates that reading is as much a creative act as the writing of the text, because both involve the play of imagination” (Charters, 2007, p. 1100). However, the equivalency between the ideas of the author and those of the reader is hard to consider for the mere fact that author’s intentionality and the reader’s acceptability may not always overlap. If they did, then all the texts existing on pages could be reader-proof as readers would be able to decode them the same way as authors have already encoded their ideas, and they would also be able to comprehend and interpret them the same way. To put it another way, no two readers can understand the same text the same way. This article will provide a firm ground to bring this reading approach to light so that it can be better understood and employed accordingly in order to follow through in line with all the working principles of the approach when it is necessary to read, interpret and criticise a work of art. The short story written by E. M Forster will be text that will be analysed, interpreted and criticised in line with the principles of the Reader-Response Criticism. It is possible and probable to put it this way that the approach is based on the premise that (1) it is reader-centred, (2) text cannot develop into a work of art unless it is read, (3) what the author tries to communicate is not always what the reader is to understand by it, (4) the meaning is not static but rather dynamic, for the experienced reader has higher intellectual capacity to delve into the deeper layers of meaning, and (5) internal meaning of text can be derived through the reader’s cognitive academic language proficiency and literary competence.

The story is an experience of an old man of humble birth, which cannot a patch on what King Oedipus experienced throughout the process of becoming a mature person, because his endurance as a result of his moral choice helps him become a mature person of absolute wisdom, though it prepared his tragic end. Mr. Lucas cannot go through the same process of becoming a mature person at the end of his experience because he is not grand enough to be doomed to such a tragic end although he settles down to the role of the King in the tragedy of Sophocles. *The Road from Colonus* was the end point of Oedipus's dreadful life, as he wanted to die there on a rock within the sacred grove of Furies, for being too old to move on though severely forced to leave the place by the local people. Mr. Lucas may have thought that it must be the place where he should have died for the very same reason as the King had. A humble person, like Mr. Lucas, cannot share the same experience just as the hero of tragedy, for tragedies are written with the sole purpose of showing people greater than they are, whereas comedies or any other literary genre usually aim to show that human beings are worse than they really are.

Mr. Lucas does mind getting old as he becomes more dependent on others, his daughter Ethel for instance, losing his free will to take his own decisions and put them into practice the way he likes. When he loses his youth, he knows perfectly that he also loses his independence. The only remedy for his own ailment is to find a better way to regain his youth. He speaks to himself in his own stream of consciousness:

“Greece is the land for young people,” he said as he stood under the plane trees, “but I will enter into it. I will possess it. Leaves shall be green again, water shall be sweet, the sky shall be blue. They were so forty years ago, and I will win them back. I do mind being old, and I will pretend no longer.”

He is fed up with the sort of attention they pretend to be paying to him to show how considerate they are. Ethel follows him everywhere to control his movements, Mr. Forman is always at his elbow ready to forestall his opinions, and Mr. Graham tries to display superficial courtesy while offering help that implies every minute he is not capable physically to do anything without their unconditional help. This turns him into a helpless agent; a feeble character too old to act out his role as properly as possible. He sees a little pool formed at the foot of the plane tree, creating a mysterious legendary fountain of youth. “He takes two steps forward, and immediately cold waters were gurgling over his ankle,” says Forster to emphasize the passion for an urgent remedy as if the water were able to endow him with youth he possessed forty years ago. A motto fills the gap in mind as to the proper solution: *If you are a drop in the ocean you are the ocean itself*. He immediately tries to attribute a holy tribute to the origin of the water to make his attempt reasonable in his mind to stay there as long as possible. Being a hollow tree as the trunk has only a bark coated with moss and fern it is easy to look up through the trunk to see the blue sky and the branches with green leaves. He gets

excited at the wonderful sight of the tree, as it is still alive over the bygone years. He expresses his amazement and his hope for a promising future as follows:

...Water out of a tree – out of a hollow tree? I never saw nor thought of that before.

He hesitates to violate the spiritual atmosphere, as the tree has been turned into a shrine with a picture of Virgin Mary and a lamp in the middle adding some sacred beauty to the hollow trunk of the tree leaning over the Khan in that rural area of Plataniste run by a family of five. He remembers his own words with a smile:

The place shall be mine; I will enter it and possess it.

When Ethel makes an offer to stay longer than they have planned, Mr. Lucas becomes happier than ever before, as it will give him ample opportunity to actualise his desire to gain his youth. There exists a great conflict turning into chaos when the family running the Khan helps Mr. Lucas to stay there as long as he wishes. The dragoman (interpreter) buys their pig to give as a kind of financial support with the hope that they will let them take Mr. Lucas with them back to London. In the end Mr. Graham beats them when the two young men want to stop the mule by holding the bridle.

Mr. Lucas and Ethel are back in their flat and having breakfast with the gas on to have enough light to see what they are eating. The fog causes to create such a gloomy outer world to reflect the inner psyche of Mr. Lucas particularly, since Ethel is as happy as she is getting married in a few weeks, leaving Mr. Lucas in the hands of Aunt Julia he is not on very good terms with. Mr. Lucas, as a fastidious person, begins complaining about gurgling water in the pipes that keeps him awake all night long, the children of their neighbours who are always making noise as if it were to cause him to lose his temper, and last but not least the dog that barks loudly enough to wake even the dead. In a flat so small and noisy he feels confined to a cell as if convicted a life long solitary confinement where he feels cornered.

Then there comes the postman and delivers a parcel wrapped in old Greek paper sent by Mrs. Forman from Greece. She unwraps the parcel and finds some asphodel bulbs sent for her to plant in the conservatory. Then she begins reading the paper just out of curiosity, and finds out that “a shocking tragedy occurred when a large tree blew down in the night crushing to death the five occupants of the little Khan there.” While she is so occupied by the news, Mr. Lucas still is concerned with the trouble of terrible noise of the children. Then she suddenly realizes that it was the same afternoon, the eighteenth of April, when they were there to have lunch in the open air. She makes some deductions:

Father, dear father, ... all those half savage people [who] tried to keep you there are dead...If it had not been for me and if Arthur (Graham) had not helped me, you must have been killed.

Mr. Lucas, still indifferent to what she talks about, keeps complaining about the problems that could make him give up the flat, as it becomes unbearable on his part to live there any longer. He says:

It is not a bit of good speaking to the governess, I shall write to the landlord and say “The reason I am giving up the house is this: the dog barks, the children next door are intolerable, and I cannot stand the noise of running water.”

She does not check “his babbling” since “she is aghast at the narrowness of escape.” She keeps silent for a long time, and at last she speaks:

Such a marvellous deliverance does make one believe in Providence.

Mr. Lucas, still busy composing his letter to the landlord, does not reply. In his silence there is more meaning than he can ever express using words that cannot speak louder than his powerful silence. To Mr. Lucas life spent in solitary gloom in his flat in London is not at all different from death in Greece, for he believes that it is not that sort of life anyone would prefer to lead if they enjoyed independence as private individuals who are at liberty to act the way they like. No matter at what age he is, he still feels that has the right to lead a life he deserves just as anyone else should. Mr. Lucas is not spiritually competent enough to reach the same level of wisdom Oedipus reached at the end of his struggles to endure the consecutive stages of suffering as a result of the prophecy that came true after he killed his own father and married his mother.

It is hard to say that Mr. Lucas does not pay attention to death when he says he sees no difference between his life and death. He does in fact when he makes every possible effort to regain his youth to enjoy more freedom as though he would never die and live forever. Time flies and he cannot go back to the beginning of his life or to any point in his bygone years, as time never moves backward. It is his own fallacy to wish that he would live as a young person and die young. He can only depict beauty if he paints it on a canvas just like a portrait of an artist as a young man. The beauty in the portrait never reaches wisdom while resisting the erosion as time passes. Man loses beauty, but gains wisdom in the process of time, which is what he is expected to reach at the end of his life, to die leaving an old body behind in the grave to decompose. It is

hard to find a young person with wisdom of venerable saints, and old body with the beauty of youth. If one is not old enough, they can never know what is to be young, as they have not reached that sort of wisdom he needs in order not to let go of the time because it naturally slips through his fingers. While garrulousness of the young can be tolerable, it turns out to be intolerable burden placed on their shoulders when particularly the old suffer from it to a great extent. It is the same conflict between Ethel and Mr. Lucas, her own father. The only truth is that Mr. Lucas is aware of the simple fact that the old become intolerable, as they become dependent on their children they have brought up. If Ethel wants to know what life is, all she has to do is to look at the old people who were once young when they were her age. His fear of death does not help him anymore to get rid of unbearable burden of the old age, as it is given as a powerful feeling to save his life; nevertheless, he cannot save his life from death's gin any longer.

Mr. Lucas is afraid of death not because his life is absolutely miserable, but because he has spent his life—his most treasured asset—in vain without ever realizing that he will come to the end of it one day. The meaning of life is not as simple as he thinks it is, as it is not the period of time he can spend complaining about trivial bits and pieces that can never make up for what he loses when he reaches the end of the road of life. Poor Mr. Lucas cannot find what he has lost in the place where he is looking for it. What he has lost is not his youth but his entire life. While gurgling water in the magical spot in Greece he thinks gives him his youth back, the same gurgling water image in his flat above his head drives him mad. It is not the water that keeps him spiritually alive, but the perspective he has had on his own life from a vantage point to see the whole life rather than the parts. If he had wondered how he would be like or look like today, he should have just looked around him to see the old, and he would not have missed the chance.

Mr. Lucas is glad to have settled down to the role of Oedipus, but what matters is whether he can ever be like Oedipus. Mr. Lucas's life cannot be a patch on that of Oedipus since Oedipus gains wisdom through incessant suffering in the process of becoming a man of absolute courage and wisdom. However, Mr. Lucas will die as a nonentity, an empty shell person, for one thing he has never made any attempt to go through the process of becoming a mature person, and for another he deliberately has chosen to be young when he is already old without gaining any wisdom. He lacks any decisive attempt to develop his human potentiality to display great personality by reaching the sort of wisdom the King had when he died at Colonus. Where people live or where they die does not matter so much as *how* and *why* they have lived their lives the way they do by forgetting all about *what* of their own story as Atwood puts it beautifully in her short story *Happy Endings* (Charters, 2007, pp. 33-35). Mr. Lucas is a socially and psychologically pathetic figure, for he is never grand enough to experience a tragic end like that of King Oedipus.

From a critical perspective, Mr. Lucas is far from being able to set a typical central character that can offer a worthwhile attitude towards one's own life and other people, let alone his family members. It is no wonder that everybody is doomed to the same end, death, preceded by a relatively long period of agedness. The words as carefully chosen verbal signs form the linguistic corpora in the text with some consistent references to the saying concealed behind them. Inward voyaging of the protagonist is not reflected well, as the outward experience in his social environment falls flat no matter how hard he seems to communicate with people around in his fastidious and querulous manner. Seeing that he cannot communicate and reason with them he tries to realize his own desires in an extremely stultifying manner because all his efforts end in ridiculous and unreasonable behaviours. His physical inadequacy is reflected in his stiff, intolerable manners displayed in full view of the all the group members. Assuming that he can gain his youth and physical power in the so-called shrine by putting his feet in the water indicates his illogical but constant obstinacy motivated by mythological beliefs and superstition. Drawing a parallel between Oedipus's tragic end and his garrulous behaviors Forster gives the reader an opportunity to see that ordinary people cannot experience a tragic end, as they are not grand enough to endure such unbearable consequences of their moral choice. Mr. Lucas cannot even make a moral choice for the very fact that he is involved with irrelevant details of everyday life that a sage, an adept person easily ignores. His visit to Greece does not help him satisfy his desire to regain his stamina to live longer; he does not care whether he survived the catastrophe that killed the occupants of the Khan at Platanista, which, to Ethel, is a "marvelous deliverance of Providence." The road from Colonus would bring him back whatever he expected to find in his life to change things right round into benevolent ones. Ethel, likened to Oedipus' daughter Antigone, cannot help him so much as Antigone did in Sophocles' tragedy not because Ethel is not that of character who does not sacrifice her time and energy to do anything for his own benefit, but because his character and personality are far from having the human potential to appreciate her ever present help that she generously extends when and where necessary. Their existence in the home environment is not that of synergy producing unity but of symbiosis, as father constantly destroys Ethel's positive and lively attitude towards life in their solitary gloom by his never ending trivial problems and consistent fastidiousness. This monotonous and prosaic life style will probably put an early end to their togetherness, as traditional Irish values deeply rooted in their social life can have a ruining impact upon young generations' future. Joyce's Eveline in the title story is the central character who cannot cope with the values deeply rooted in their past and finally loses her chance to get married and sail to another country in order to start a new life with a prospective loving husband, as she cannot dare to decide to leave home with the hand stretched out for her to hold while she has "all the waves of the sea tumbling about her heart," as Joyce (2011) expresses her inner feelings (p.32). She returns home lonelier than ever before, devoted to her familiar life to take care of her father as a sacrificed home-raised child. She simply disappears in her life spent in the same surrounding with the red-brick houses all around while dealing with the household jobs and problems that arise due to family conflicts of no significance. Ethel, however, has already decided to marry not to fall prey to what traditionally

awaits her. It is hard to guess whether she ever feels pity when she leaves her father in the hands of Aunt Julia. What is clear is that Ethel will never allow the values of the past to impose upon her the role she has to act out for the common good of the family members. Her cool and consistent reasonable manner will help develop a firm ground to stand on the issue of protecting her life for her own future. This new trend of leading a life of their own choice is the backbone of the generation conflicts that still go on in new forms in every country without reservation. *Tempus fugit*, but man does not change. Mr. Lucas, who becomes the butt of satire, simply takes each day as it comes.

To conclude, this article focuses on the critical reading of the short story *The Road from Colonus* in the light of Reader-response Criticism. As a critical reading approach, it foregrounds the idea that the text exists on the page and can very possibly turn into a work of art when a reader puts his hands on it simply because the meaning is not inherent in the text. What this premise suggests is that the meaning can be derived from the text through creative effort of the reader, as what the author tries to say cannot be more than what the reader understands by what the text aims to transmit. In the light of these principles, it is safe to say that what Mr. Lucas understands by life he leads can be different from what younger generation understands by their own lives, as they live on different planes and in various quarters although they seem to have been raised in the same society and are supposed to share the same ethical and moral values. Life as the spiritual text can only manifest itself in line with the philosophy the individual has developed and followed faithfully and consistently till the end of the road on the earth. It is logical and meaningful to put it this way, as Cather referred to what French writer Michelet asserted, “the end is nothing; the road is all” (Kral, 1984, p.76).

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