

# Controlled reader essay

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An author can only partially structure an experience in an attempt to elicit a desired response from the reader, for there are two types of readers an author must consider: the implied reader and the actual reader. The implied reader is “ assumed and created by the work itself” whereas, the actual reader brings his/her own experiences to the text and thus each reader takes away a different message from a text (MacMannus, para 1). Du Bois’s narrative, “ A Mild Suggestion”, attempts to ensure a certain response, from the reader, by including a description of the passengers’ reactions to the colored man’s story, but to some degree, the effects on the reader vary depending on the experiences he or she brings to the text. However, without this final description, the message many have been interpreted even more differently, thus its inclusion is to help ensure that the intent of the colored man’s story is not misconstrued. By including it, Du Bois leads his audience and structures the reaction more thoroughly. By examining the reactions of the characters in the final paragraphs while considering both Du Bois’s purpose and initial characterization, it is apparent what reaction he would like the reader to have. The reaction of the Little Old Lady impacts the audience. At the beginning of the story, the Little Old Lady is not very concerned about sitting beside the “ colored man” and in somewhat annoyed at the colored man’s “ bad habits”, but she has not been presented as prejudice towards the coloured man.

This establishes a context with which to interpret her final reaction, when she is depicted as having tears in her eyes and going silently to her cabin (Du Bois, 94). She is not angry at the colored man, but rather is upset about the story. Perhaps, as a suppressed woman, she is sad about the story and

can to some degree identify with the coloured man's plight. Perhaps she is teary eyed because the others have missed the satirical point of the story.

Regardless of the interpretation, the effect is that the audience feels sorry for the Little Old Lady. In addition, women in her situation could readily identify with her, and as a result, appreciate the point of the colored man's story. Clearly, she has been bothered by his suggestion and resigns silently to her cabin. The mention of her silence is important, because it demonstrates that there is no one there with whom she is willing to share a reaction. The presentation of her as an isolated individual furthers the reader's feeling of sympathy toward her and allows for women in her situation to identify with her felt isolation and ostracization.

Du Bois finishes with her reaction, because it is the most powerful. Thus, the reaction of the Little Old Lady develops pathos in the reader and forces the reader to consider the deeper meaning of the colored man's story. The reader is also affected by the reaction of the Southerner and the Woman.

Throughout, these two individuals are presented as unified and in the end the Southerner chooses the Woman. Specifically, the narrator states that these two were "heard to say something about fools" (94). Who exactly are the fools? Are the fools the Southerner and the Woman for having listened to the story? Are they the emancipationists who gave the colored man a voice? Or are the fools all emancipated colored men? The word "fool" is used in a plural sense and consequently leaves the reader to openly interpret its meaning. The effect on the audience is one of disassociation from the Southerner because the reader does not want to be lumped in with the real

fool, who in this case is the Southerner, for missing the irony in the story. We believe the Southerner to be obtuse for having missed the humour and again the reader's reaction is to reject him and his beliefs. In addition, the reader certainly does not want to be associated with the Woman who is presented as a weak follower. Time and again, she postures in hopes of gaining the Southerner's approval.

As an ally to the Southerner, she is being chosen and not doing the choosing, so consequently, she is easily swayed and the reader disassociates from the Woman. The reader would prefer to be thought of as someone is with convictions and values and should shun the Woman for displaying none of her own. Women readers of the time would be discontent with her presentation because she reacts as the stereotypical female, unable to think for herself, overly concerned with the dominant view as represented through the Southerner.

The result is that the reader does not want to identify with either the Southerner or the Woman and in fact rejects them both. The impact of the Westerner's reaction on the reader must also be considered. The Westerner's initial reactions are also important in putting his final reactions in context.

At the beginning, he mumbles to the New Yorker about not being able to “account for (her poor) tastes” (92) when referring to the Little Old Lady. This comment casts him in a negative light because he criticizes someone who has been characterized with words associated with weakness and feebleness. This reinforces the sympathy for the underdog, in this case, the

Little Old Woman. In addition, he clearly displays his prejudices. This sets the stage for interpreting his reaction to the story when “ he stares in admiration” (94). One must ask what exactly is he admiring? It is not the irony of the story, for clearly he does not understand the coloured man’s story when he states, ““ Now what in hell do you suppose the darky meant? ”” (94). So, is he admiring the reaction of the Little Old Lady? -Is he happy she is sad? Is he admiring the fact that the coloured man was able to engage the audience on the ship so much so that they forgot themselves? This demonstrates to the reader that the Westerner has enjoyed the effects of the story on the others, but has missed the intent thus portraying him as ignorant and racist.

What is there to admire about the content of the story? A final interpretation is that the admiration is as a positive reaction to the colored man’s solution. Regardless, the audience is expected to admire the reaction the coloured man’s story receives and not the Westerner himself. What he has enjoyed can only be the way the coloured man has twisted the Southerner and exposed him. Du Bois exposes the Westerner because he does not understand the satiric gist of the story.

Consequently, the reader does not want to be identified with the Westerner. The New Yorker also presents an interesting reaction. There is no previous context in which to set him, so the final reaction is more subject to interpretation. Because no negative connotations have been made about the New Yorker in the initial part of the story, there is no negative reaction to have regarding the “ smile”. What exactly is the New Yorker smiling at? One

can assume that he is smiling at the highly intellectual nature of the story. The difference between him and the Westerner is that the New Yorker understands the irony associated with the story, but has no further reaction.

This disappoints the reader. The New Yorker, should have more of a reaction to the story. As a Northerner, he should be further developing the point the colored man is trying to make, but he just sits there with a knowing smile. He is a man who is informed, or so it seems, but is one who chooses not to act. The reader's reaction again is one of disassociation and to some degree disgust as we regard this hypocritical individual. The New Yorker is not someone other Northerners would want to fashion themselves after. So if the reader were a Northerner, they would reject him.

The New Yorker in conjunction with the Westerner presents an empty, and in the Westerner's case an unenlightened response and the reader would not want to identify with this. In conclusion, the reader could consider the reactions of the Westerner, Southerner and the Woman to be idiotic because they miss the overall point that the coloured man is trying to make. The New Yorker demonstrates a hypocritical reaction because he understands the gist of the story, but does nothing. Consequently, the reader reacts negatively to them and their reactions. The reader would not want to be lumped in with such a group who clearly miss the basic humour. The audience identifies most with the reaction of The Little Old Lady. She is someone who understands the story and is frustrated because she can do nothing as indicated by her character description. By presenting the reactions of the passengers and not ending with the penultimate paragraph, Du Bois has

basically dictated to his readers how they are to react and not react to the ironic solution and to the plight of the emancipated colored men of America.

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[cnr. edu/home/bmcmanus/readercrit. html](http://www.cnr.edu/home/bmcmanus/readercrit.html) Du Bois, W. E. B, “ A Mild Suggestion” The Broadview Anthology of Expository Prose.

Eds. Roberts, Tammy , et all Broadview Press: Peterborough, 2002.