

The influence of
books and reading on
the main character as
a child in the novel ...



The influence of books & reading on the main character as a child in the novel "Anton Reiser" by Karl Philipp Moritz. Escape or Drugs? Describe the meaning of reading in Karl Philipp Moritz's Anton Reiser.

The novel Anton Reiser by Karl Philipp Moritz deals with issues of growing up in Germany toward the end of the eighteenth century. This semi-autobiographical work traces the first twenty one years of the author's own life. The author performs a retrospective analysis of his psychological development during these years. This essay will pertain itself to one particular aspect of the work, namely, the analogy between Anton Reiser's resort to reading books with the modern day teen phenomenon of using recreational drugs.

A careful scrutiny of the early life of Reiser gives clues to his psychological development and his propensity to fall back on escapist activities. Foremost among the conditions was the family environment in which he grew up. He has a very unpleasant childhood as his parents never get along. From this backdrop of a dysfunctional family he is apprenticed with a pietistic hat-maker proves equally troublesome and is forced to go back to school. His subsequent foray into the theatre also fails to take off. As Reiser gets pushed from one failed venture to the next, he is desperate to find an anchor to his life. It is here that books enter his life. They not only give him a feeling of liberation from his depressing reality, but also serve a therapeutic purpose (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2009). In other words, he resorts to books the way a troubled teenager would resort to recreational drugs in contemporary times. On a broader note,

"Anton Reiser has been generally recognized as an important source of the Genie Periode in which the artistic temperament came into its own as fiction <https://assignbuster.com/the-influence-of-books-reading-on-the-main-character-as-a-child-in-the-novel-anton-reiser-by-karl-philipp-moritz/>

material, and as one of the first German followers, after Sophie la Roches *Fraülein von Sternheim* (1771) and Jung-Stillings *Autobiography* (1777), of Rousseau's *Confessions* and perhaps of the *Sentimental Journey*, unless *Werther* in 1774 can be considered as preceding Reiser in that field. It has many typical traits of this sensitive spirit school as well as of the *Bildungsroman*." (Müller, 1987, p. 23)

The relevance of Reiser's reading habits goes much beyond escapism. As is accepted in literary circles, the focus of a high-quality literary work is not so much its plot but its aesthetics. While climax is an essential part of any work of literature, its ultimate value is determined by its artistic elements such as style and substance. Seen from this perspective, *Anton Reiser*, which contains four parts, was unfinished by the author. In fact, the fifth and final section of the book was composed by Moritz's friend Klischnig much later. Just as a good literary work raises more questions than it answers and provides no more than a context to contemplate, *Anton Reiser* too remains an unfinished work (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2009). In this respect, the affinity for books shown by the young Reiser has a profound effect in his own literary experiment and holds a relevance that is beyond mere escapism. This interpretation of the book reading habit of young Reiser is also suggested by Susanne Howe, a noted scholar on 18th century German literature. According to her, his father's addiction "to the mystic writings of Madame Guion, and the permanently religious cast that these books gave to Antons thought made him even more introspective and 'empfindsam', with a "craving for the infinite." Here he wins some interest and approval from the masters by his zeal for Latin and his verse writing, but his companions persecute him and he comes to hate the city with its four towers. Troupes of

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traveling players and his own omnivorous reading arouse his interest in the theater" (Howe, p. 35). Hence, it is incorrect to equate Reiser's fondness for reading and the modern day ailment of consuming drugs.

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