

WRIT319 MAJOR ESSAY

By Rachel Loveday

"[I] have always been intensely curious to know...from what sources that strange being, the creative writer, draws his material." (Sigmund Freud, 1908)

In this essay I will be analysing a short creative text that I wrote titled; *Countdown* which has been included with this essay. I will be using two theories to analyse this text; the first theory I will be using to analyse this text is the psychoanalytic theory of narrative desire and unsatisfied epistemophilia which was discussed in week six. The second theory I will be using to analyse this text is the theory of the Implied Reader and how the circumstances presented in *Countdown* set the rules for the reader on how to read the text which was discussed in week four. I will be then be comparing these two theories. I will then be concluding with discussing which one of these two methods is the most productive approach.

"Our lives are ceaselessly intertwined with narrative, with the stories that we tell and hear told, those we dream or imagine or would like to tell, all of which are reworked in that story of our own lives that we narrate to ourselves in an episodic, sometimes semi-conscious, but virtually uninterrupted monologue. We live immersed in narrative, recounting and reassessing the meaning of our past actions, anticipating the outcome of our future projects, situating ourselves at the intersection of several stories not yet completed." (Brooks, 1984, pp3)

There is an innate need with every human being to tell and be part of a narrative. In order to achieve both of these objectives, the reader needs to understand exactly what they are reading and why they are reading it, and this is where narrative desire comes into play.

Countdown is the story of Damien, a young man who is living the last day of his life like any other day, unaware of the fact that he is going to die. The character is unaware of this fact, but the reader is made aware.

"Desire is always there at the start of a narrative, often in a state of initial arousal, often having reaching a state of intensity such that movement must be created, action undertaken, change begun." (Brooks, 1984, pp 38)

I wrote *Countdown* after two people in my life died within the same month, death was on my brain and I wanted to express the unknown of death and how most people are aware that they are going to die, but they are unaware of when or how they are going to die. The narrative desire that is presented to the reader in *Countdown* is that the reader is aware of the protagonist's imminent death by being explicitly told exactly how long the protagonist has left to live.

"Monday April 2nd 2011, 06.18 (Damien has 15 hours and 17 minutes left to live)
[Loveday, 2011, pp1]"

If the reader is really caught up in the narrative desire, they will go to the effort to do the mathematical work to figure out exactly what time the protagonist will die.

Although the reader is given the time of the protagonist's death, they are not given the cause. This is another form of narrative desire presented to the reader at the beginning of the story, for the reader to find out how the protagonist dies, they must progress through the plot. If the reader doesn't read on, there is no action, reading on is the action that must be undertaken.

"If the motor of narrative is desire, totalizing, building ever-larger units of meaning, the ultimate determinants of meaning lie *at the end*, and narrative desire is ultimately, inexorably, desire *for the end*." (Brooks, 1984, pp52)

As the reader is given partial information of the protagonist's fate at the beginning of the story, the reader can only assume that to obtain the rest of the information if they continue to read the story, in particular to the end, there is an assumption that they will be given the rest of the information at the end of the story. The desire for the end is given to the reader by implanting the desire to discover how the protagonist will die.

"..The realization of the desire for narrative encounters the limits of narrative, that is, the fact that one can tell a life only in terms of its limits or margins. The telling is always *in terms of* the impending end." (Brooks, 1984, pp52)

Countdown only focuses on the last day of Damien's life, who he was, how long he lived for, how he lived his life was irrelevant—his age is not explicitly stated, although as he talks about his day at uni and due to his mannerisms and dialogue, we can assume he is in early-to-mid twenties. Because there is a stated specific amount of time that the story is told in (the last fifteen hours of Damien's life) and that there is an objective to find out how Damien dies, this story is all about the impending end.

“Unsatisfied epistemophilia” has been defined by Brooks as the dissatisfaction that comes with discovering knowledge, or in the case of narrative, the dissatisfaction that comes with reaching the end of the narrative and discovering or obtaining the knowledge that is desired by the reader. In *Countdown*, there is a desire in the reader to discover how Damien dies, but because the reader discovers how he dies at the end of the story, there is dissatisfaction with this discovery of knowledge as not only, the story has come to an end, but the desire to discover how Damien dies has been fulfilled. There is no longer any need or desire to continue with the story and as the story has come to an end, the reader cannot continue anyway. The reader can re-read the story if they wish, if they enjoyed it, but it would be likely that the reader has no desire to re-read the story as they know how it would end.

“...The readers take the text into their consciousnesses and make it their own *experience*. It seems that, while texts do set the terms on which the reader actualises meanings, the reader’s own ‘store of experience’ will take some part in the process. The reader’s existing consciousness will have to make certain internal adjustments in order to receive and process the alien viewpoints which the text presents as reading takes place.” (Selden and Widdowson, 1993, pp57)

In other words, the readers absorb the text and take their own interpretations on it, even though the author and the text set the terms on how the reader, reads the text, how the readers take on the experience controls the way that they absorb the meaning of the text and the reader has to make adjustments in their conscious to absorb each of the different texts that they read.

So how do the readers absorb the meaning of and experience *Countdown*?

“There are certain rules of the game, and the [Implied] Reader is someone eager to play such a game.”¹

The Implied Reader is one big game player.

The Implied Reader is a reader who is eager to obey the rules and judge a text based on the circumstances presented by this said text. With *Countdown* the Implied Reader is given the vital information that the protagonist only has a certain amount of time to live and to find out how he dies, the Reader must read on to find out, that’s the game with *Countdown*.

“[The Implied Reader] organizes and reorganizes the various data offered....by the text. These are given factors, the fixed points on which we base our ‘interpretation’ trying to fit them together the way we think the author meant them to be fitted.” (Iser 1974, pp288)². With the Implied Reader, there is a heavy emphasis that how a reader perceives a text and the pact they make with the author to read a text, is decided entirely on how they interpret a text through their consciousness.

Countdown can be perceived in a couple of different ways. For example, it can be interpreted as the inner monologue of a man who is unaware that he is about to die. And it can also be interpreted as an author who is justifying her fear of death by creating a likeable character and deciding to kill him off and even giving the reader a certain amount of time to count down to his death, to demonstrate how death looms over everyone. Iser asks; “What actually does take place between an author and a reader?” (Iser 1989, pp 3), what happens between the two depends on the context of the story. The two examples that I provided of how *Countdown* can be interpreted shows an example of what can take place between an author and a reader. The first interpretation is how a reader perceives *Countdown* and the second interpretation is how another author and this author, myself perceives the text. If the reader can identify the author’s intention for the reader, than the relationship between the author and the reader is established.

I have used the theories of Narrative Desire and the Implied Reader to analyse *Countdown*. Narrative desire is all about teasing the reader, providing arousal for the reader to want to read the text, and how once the desire is fulfilled and when the reader has reached the end of the story and obtained the knowledge, unsatisfied epistemophilia is achieved-the dissatisfaction of the narrative desire being fulfilled. Whilst the Implied Reader theory is about the pact and relationship that is established between the author and the reader once a set of rules is established for the way that a reader is supposed to read a text. But which theory is better in the context of *Countdown*?

By establishing that the narrative desire of *Countdown* is that the reader is made aware that the protagonist is going to die but the protagonist himself is not aware of this fact provides the arousal for the reader to read the story. The desire and

need to find out how the protagonist is going to die makes the reader read on. Whereas, if the Implied Reader theory is used, by giving the reader this vital information, the author is telling the reader “This man has this long to live, if you want to find out how he dies, you have to read on.” There are rules, a pact, and a relationship established between the author and the reader, by giving the reader this vital information and by setting up these rules, this pact and this relationship, it is almost as if the author is forcing the reader to read their story.

“A literary text must therefore be conceived in such a way that it will engage the reader’s imagination in the task of working things out for himself, for reading is only a pleasure when it is active and creative. In this process of creativity, the text may either not go far enough, or may go too far, so we may say boredom and overstrain form the boundaries beyond which the reader will leave the field of play.” (Iser 1974, pp 275). So if the reader is feeling forced to read on, as I have stated with the Implied Reader theory, does that provide motivation for the reader to read on, or will they simply walk away because they feel that they shouldn’t be forced to read a text? The answer to that lies with each individual reader and each individual text.

“I think that a narrator, as well as a poet, should never provide interpretations of his own work. A text is a machine conceived for eliciting interpretations. When one has a text to question, it is irrelevant to ask the author.” (Eco 1996, pp 1)

Countdown is all about curiosity and eventually discovering how the protagonist; Damien is going to die. It is all about teasing the reader with vital information, which implants the necessary narrative desire for the reader to read on and eventually obtain the knowledge of how Damien dies. Therefore, I believe reading text by analysing it using the narrative desire theory is more effective than analysing it through the Implied Reader theory.

FOOTNOTES

1. This quote was directly taken from the Week 4 Lecture PowerPoint: Setting the Rules for Reading.
2. This quote was directly taken from the Week 4 Lecture PowerPoint: Setting the Rules for Reading.

REFERENCE LIST

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