
4-1-1980

Appreciation of Reading Through the Five Senses

Mary Jane Gray
Loyola University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons



Part of the Education Commons

Recommended Citation

Gray, M. (1980). Appreciation of Reading Through the Five Senses. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 20 (3). Retrieved from https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol20/iss3/4

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Special Education and Literacy Studies at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.

APPRECIATION OF READING THROUGH THE FIVE SENSES

Mary Jane Gray

LOYOLA UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

While the definition of reading remains an elusive one for reasons pointed out by Edmund Huey (1908) more than seventy years ago, there is one component of the reading process which surely deserves attention. That component is the appreciation gained in reading through the five senses. How is this accomplished? An examination of reading and its relation to the five senses should help to make this clear.

Reading and Hearing

There is a great deal of similarity between reading and conversation in that a good book is like a good friend. One chooses friends at least partially on the basis of common interests. The same thing is true of choosing books. One is not likely to read something unless there is information of interest to the reader, entertainment, or a combination of these. Perhaps one of the major reasons some children face difficulty with reading in the classroom today is that they are frequently asked to read materials which are not of interest to them, which do not entertain, and which are far removed from their experiences.

While the reader does not have direct contact for a personal conversation with the writer, he does interact with the writer's words, or rather with his message. Each reader brings to his task his own unique background. If there is a match between that background and the material which is being read, he is likely to meet success in his reading and to want to continue. Even without a close match, if there is keen interest, the reader is likely to be able to handle the material satisfactorily. When the book is of great interest, the reader can move ahead rapidly, or more slowly if he wishes to savor some of the passages or the language.

Radio

An excellent example of one means of obtaining information and entertainment through hearing or listening is the radio. For today's children, radio listening is likely synonymous with music, news, sports, and weather. Not so for those of a generation or more ago. Until the late 1940's and early 1950's when television began to take its place, radio provided much more for both children and adults.

There were serials for children (Jack Armstrong and Captain Midnight); mysteries (The Shadow, Inner Sanctum, and The Green Hornet); comedy (Burns and Allen, Baby Snooks, Jack Benny, and Bob Hope); drama (Lux Radio Theater and Kraft Theater); quiz programs (Dr. I.Q.); even soap operas with some of them continuing into a new medium of television.

A look at what went on in homes during the evening program hours would likely find many of the family members sitting around the radio. Why? Surely it was not necessary to gather around to be able to see, and the volume could be adjusted so that it could be heard over the entire room. It seemed, however, that coming from that radio were the voices of friends and that appeared to be the best way to share the pleasure as a group. Certainly what was desired and what television provides for us is the picture, yet in that sense it has deprived us one of the pleasures of the radio which is also one of the pleasures of reading, doing our own visualizing. It was just as easy to get chills up and down one's spine from hearing the creaking door of Inner Sanctum as it is to get chills when viewing the door actually creaking on a television mystery theater presentation. In addition each listener formed his own image of just what was behind that creaking door. This is also true when one reads a book. This extra involvement of visualization required on the part of someone listening to that radio as opposed to that person viewing television placed it a step nearer to what is required in reading. Even sound is not necessary if a writer is skilled in his choice of words.

A passage from Wilder's *The Long Winter* (1940) describes an experience familiar to all of us who have spent many winters in the North.

The constant beating of the winds against the house, the roaring, shrieking, howling of the storm, made it hard even to think (p. 292).

No sound effects are necessary; it is only necessary to reach back into one's memory to bring these sounds clearly to us.

Reading and Sight

Although it is true that reading is at least partially a visual process, it cannot be said with certainty that unless one's sight is impaired one will learn to read. Why is this so? If we take a look at another visual means of presenting information perhaps the reason for this can be clearly understood.

Television

Possibly to better understand television and how it relates to reading we should answer the question, "Why do children view television?" Are the reasons the same as those for which they read?

The major reason for viewing television is entertainment. A second reason why children view television is to learn something. They prefer incidental learning, however, with entertainment still the major interest.

Can a writer through skillful use of words bring before the reader's eye the same vivid pictures which television provides? The next passage from another of Wilder's books, *Little House in the Big Woods* (1953), provides an affirmative answer to that question.

Each one by herself climbed up on a stump, and then all at once, holding their arms out wide, they fell off the stumps into the soft,

deep snow. They fell flat on their faces. Then they tried to get up without spoiling the marks they made when they fell. If they did it well, there in the snow were five holes, shaped almost exactly like four little girls and a boy, arms and legs and all. They called these their pictures (pp. 65-66).

In addition to appealing to the sense of sight, this also should evoke memories on the part of children who have engaged in such an activity of the feel of the soft, cold snow as they fell headfirst into it.

Reading and Taste

The teacher who reads to his class for a short time each day does much the same thing as supermarkets or bakeries which offer their customers a sample of one of their products. Whether it is a piece of sausage or a square of coffee cake, the purpose behind the free sample is to provide concrete evidence that the product is a good one. Usually one small taste encourages the customers to buy the total product. The teacher's purpose in reading to children should serve to lead them to want to complete the books independently after the first taste.

Moving beyond the taste as a sample which encourages further reading, authors are also able to provide readers with a literal taste from their descriptions.

A not entirely palatable feast from the standpoint of human beings, but nonetheless very real, is the one enjoyed by Wilbur in *Charlotte's Web* (White, 1952).

It was a delicious meal—skim milk, wheat middlings, leftover pancakes, half a doughnut, the rind of a summer squash, two pieces of stale toast, a third of a gingersnap, a fish tail, one orange peel, several noodles from noodle soup, the scum off a cup of cocoa, an ancient jelly roll, a strip of paper from the lining of the garbage pail and a spoonful of raspberry jello (p. 75).

Reading and Smell

A closely related example to that of tasting is that of smelling. Once again just a small sniff may be enough to sharpen the desire for whatever is providing the delicious aroma. A child coming home from school for the day may open the front door of his home and be greeted by the smell of fresh cinnamon rolls, chocolate cake, or apple pie which his mother has just baked. While these items might have been far removed from his thoughts before entering the house, the delicious smell should appeal to the child's desire for a sample of the product.

You may be thinking that this is one area which cannot be adequately described through words. Two examples provide the opportunity to determine whether or not this is true.

Wilder's *Little House in the Big Woods* (1953) supplies the first sample.

It smelled good. The whole house smelled good, with the sweet and spicy smells from the kitchen and the smell of hickory logs burning with clear, bright flames in the fireplace and the smell of a cloverapple beside Grandma's mending basket on the table (p. 135).

There is a most appealing use of smell in this passage. Both the spicy smells from the kitchen which could be gingerbread, pumpkin pie, applesauce cake, or any other of a wide range of choices, along with the pleasant smell of wood smoke from the fireplace, make this a scene a reader would like to enter and enjoy.

To anyone who has experienced smelling a rotten egg, the description by White in *Charlotte's Web* (1952) could only serve to stir up the unpleasant memory and the desire to remove oneself from the vicinity of the offending item.

The trough tipped up and then came down with a slap. The goose-egg was right underneath. There was a dull explosion as the egg broke, and then a horrible smell. Fern screamed. Avery jumped to his feet. The air was filled with the terrible gases and smells from the rotten egg. Templeton, who had been resting in his home, scuttled away into the barn.

"Good night!" screamed Avery. "Good Night! What a stink! Let's get out of here!" (p. 72).

Avery has expressed for all readers their very own heartfelt desire to be up and as far away as possible from the terrible odor.

Reading and Feeling

Finally, through reading it is possible to recapture a delightful moment, a thrilling moment, or a very sad moment and actually feel again the same way as when the event was originally experienced.

This last example is again from *Charlotte's Web* (1952).

"Good bye!" she whispered. Then she summoned all her strength and waved one of her front legs at him.

She never moved again. Next day, as the Ferris Wheel was being taken apart and the race horses were being loaded into vans and the entertainers were packing up their belongings and driving away in their trailers, Charlotte died. The Fair Grounds were soon deserted. The sheds and buildings were empty and forlorn.

Countless readers have mourned the death of Charlotte and without realizing it have learned from it a great deal about life itself.

A Final Comment

It should be apparent by now that the best reading material can offer far greater experience than any other single medium. The major

ingredients necessary are the writer's skillful use of words in communicating his message and the reader's interaction with that message.

I feel Robert Burns would approve of paraphrasing some of his words to most effectively express this interaction.

Oh what a power the author gives us
As his words display new worlds before us!
He widens our horizons for us,
And thus we grow.

REFERENCES

- Gray, M. J. "The Effect of Home Televiewing on School Children." *Elementary English*, vol. 46, (March 1969), 300-309.
- Huey, F. B. *The Psychology and Pedagogy of Reading*. New York: Macmillan, 1908.
- Schramm, W., J. Lyle, and E. Parker. *Television in the Lives of our Children*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1961.
- White, E. B. *Charlotte's Web*. New York: Harper and Row, 1952.
- Wilder, L. I. *The Little House in the Big Woods*. New York: Harper and Row, 1953.
- _____. *The Long Winter*. New York: Harper and Row, 1940.