

A Critical Investigation of Reader Response in “Howl’s Moving Castle” : A Study of Goodreads Reviews

Aulia Risky Harlina ^{1*}, Nurul Indah Ramadina ², Rita Hartati ³

¹Fakultas Bahasa dan Seni, Sastra Inggris, Universitas Negeri Medan, Indonesia

auliajung61@gmail.com ^{1*}, nurulindah888@gmail.com ², ritahartati@unimed.ac.id ³

Alamat: Jl. William Iskandar Ps. V, Kenangan Baru, Kec. Percut Sei Tuan, Kabupaten Deli Serdang, Sumatera Utara

Korespondensi email: auliajung61@gmail.com

Abstract. *Reader response theory offers a dynamic approach to understanding literary interpretation, shifting focus from text-centered analysis to reader engagement. This study investigates reader responses to Diana Wynne Jones's "Howl's Moving Castle" through an analysis of reviews on Goodreads, utilizing Beach's framework of reader-response theory. Employing a qualitative descriptive method, the research collected 60 reader comments, systematically sampling one review per month over the past year. The analysis categorized responses across five dimensions: textual, experiential, psychological, social, and cultural, revealing that experiential responses (33.33%) and textual responses (27.08%) predominated. Additionally, the study examined reader engagement across cognitive (50%), emotional (36.4%), and behavioral (13.6%) dimensions. Findings demonstrate how online reading communities like Goodreads transform literary interpretation from a solitary to a collaborative experience, highlighting the complex ways readers interact with literary texts. By exploring the nuanced responses to "Howl's Moving Castle," this research contributes to our understanding of contemporary reading practices, critical thinking literacy, and the evolving landscape of digital literary engagement.*

Keywords: *Theory, Response, Goodreads, Analysis*

1. INTRODUCTION

Reader response is the relationship between the reader and the text in which the reader's personal background influences their interpretation and reaction to the text (Rosenblatt, 1978). Reader reaction entails analyzing literary works with these questions in mind. The emphasis shifts from the text to the reader, who is regarded as actively participating in the reading process (Fatah, 2023). A literary work resides in the reader's imagination rather than on the printed page, allowing the reader to participate in its development (NTC Dictionary, 1991: 181). Regardless of their specific points of view, all reader-response critics agree that because each individual reader develops or produces the meanings of a text to various degrees, there is no single accurate meaning for a book or any of its linguistic components (Kanserina, 2015).

Building on our understanding of reader-response theory highlights the dynamic relationship between the reader and the text. Yang (2002) illustrates this connection by noting that literary texts often present social dilemmas and conflicts. Such reading demands personal responses from readers." In reader-response theory, as Schieble (2010) describes, readers create meaning from the text through either an aesthetic or efferent stance. Aesthetic responses provide readers with a continuum for attending to the reading experience, while through this process, readers are expected to explore a range of possible

meanings (Purves, 1993). According to Gopal (2023), reader-response theory's development marked a significant shift from the traditional method of literary analysis, which focused mainly on finding meaning solely from the text, to a more reader-focused approach that emphasizes response and interaction with the text.

Emerging technologies are altering the methods of writing, reading, publishing, and managing books, hence modifying the social and material dynamics of reading culture (Albrechtslund, 2019). Goodreads is the preeminent social book cataloging platform globally, explicitly created to augment the social dimensions of reading and evaluating literature (Albrechtslund, 2019). In practice, users exhibit variability in their management of the equilibrium between social networking functionalities and cataloging capabilities (Thelwall and Kousha 2017; see also Albrechtslund 2017). Goodreads offers a live update stream as its main interface, displaying updates (books added and/or reviewed) from others the individual has befriended or is following, alongside their own reviews in this feed.

One of the books with many readers on the Goodreads application is Howl's Moving Castle, with a rating of 4.29, which has been reviewed 33,274 times and has been rated 387,490 times. Howl's Moving Castle," by Diana Wynne Jones, is a fantasy book that takes place in the magical land of Ingary. In 2004, Hayao Miyazaki directed Studio Ghibli, which grossed \$236 million worldwide. It earned an Academy Award nomination for Best Animated Feature in 2006. At the 61st Venice Film Festival, the film won the Osella Awards for Technical Achievement and received Annie Award nominations. Studio Ghibli's unique animation style and storytelling approach.

"It was an enjoyable read with fun characters adventures and there certainly was a lot jam packed into this short book!"

This is one of the lines from the reader response that demonstrates the pattern of psychological response, as it reveals the reader's cognitive reaction to the richness of the story, expressing an admiration for activity but possibly feeling overwhelmed by its tempo. The reader's positive feedback on the characters and adventures suggests a high level of engagement with the book, making it a compelling choice for those seeking a fast-paced and entertaining read. The abundance of content in this short book may have left the reader feeling satisfied yet craving more, showcasing the author's ability to captivate and immerse readers in a whirlwind of excitement.

To support the smooth running of this research, the researcher uses the following articles as research references: (1) *Readers' experiences of fiction and nonfiction*

influencing critical thinking by Helena Hollis, 2023 (2) *Amazon, Kindle, and Goodreads: implications for literary consumption in the digital age* by Albrechtslund, 2019 (3) “*When will we lie down in darkness and have our light in ashes?*” *A Reader-Response Analysis of William Styron’s Lie Down in Darkness* by Fatah, 2023 (4) *Reader Response Journals In the Analysis of Literary Works Among Undergraduate Students* by Lee et al, 2023 (5) *A reader response method not just for ‘you’* by Alice Bell et al, 2019. While previous studies have extensively explored reader responses to novels and aspects of reading literacy, gaps still need to be found in understanding how these responses manifest specifically on online platforms and within the framework of Beach's reader-response theory. Additionally, limited research has examined how reading literacy is expressed through digital reader interactions. This study addresses these gaps by analyzing reader responses to *Howl's Moving Castle* within an online context, using Beach's framework to categorize and interpret the varied ways readers engage with and respond to the text. Through this approach, this research aims to shed light on the nuanced manifestations of reading literacy as they appear in the digital sphere.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Reader Response Theory

Mostly a work of imagination distinguished by excellence in style and expression, literature encompasses written material such as poetry, prose, drama, and essays (Bahri, 2021). Furthermore, literature is often categorized based on historical eras or adherence to specific aesthetic criteria or expectations, commonly referred to as genres. Within the vast domain of literature, various forms, including poetry, prose, and drama, abound. Specifically, prose refers to any written work that follows a simple grammatical structure, wherein words and phrases are arranged into sentences and paragraphs (Bahri, 2021). In addition, a book represents a longer variation of a text. Among literary works, novels stand out as a medium for authors to express ideas in response to their surroundings (Napitupulu, 2023). Similarly, Kenney (2019:31) emphasized how the book’s length and use of narrative fiction shape the portrayal of real-life circumstances.

Building upon the concept of literature, a novel is a form of fictitious prose that conveys a realistic story about human experiences over an extended period. Notably, the novel emerged as one of the most influential literary forms, especially during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Unlike shorter genres, the novel introduces a more complex ‘storyline’ within a fictional framework. Moreover, the novel distinguishes itself through

its remarkable diversity, making it a subject of extensive study. Although scholars have analyzed its evolution, the relative importance of each aspect remains debatable due to shifting significance over time. Key elements of a novel include the plot, characters, point of view, dialogue, and setting, all of which contribute to storytelling. As Spurgin (2006:4) explained, "The novel is the most popular literary genre of the past two centuries. It is also widely distributed and serves as an extremely valuable tool." For instance, novels offer a dynamic representation of societal complexities and human behavior shaped by childhood experiences. Additionally, Tsai (2012:23) highlighted the legitimacy of novels, noting that they are meticulously edited to convey meaning and engage readers through imagination, creative narratives, and relatable language.

In contrast to literature's creative focus, critical thinking emphasizes analytical processes that aid in problem-solving, decision-making, and goal achievement. According to Ruggiero (1988, as cited in Esplugas & Landwehr, 1996), critical thinking involves seeking answers and deriving meaning. Moreover, contemporary scholars describe it as a purposeful process of reflection based on logical reasoning (Brookfield, 1987; Ennis, 1989; Paul, 1992; Sternberg, 1986). Since the mid-1990s, researchers have increasingly highlighted the significance of preconceptions and deliberate reflection in critical thinking (Ennis, 1993; Facione, 1990; Paul, 1997). Furthermore, effective critical thinking requires self-correction, monitoring for sound reasoning, and reflexivity (Horenstein, 2011).

In the realm of literary analysis, Beach's (1993) reader-response theory underscores the vital role of the reader's experiences, emotions, and perspectives in interpreting texts. Unlike traditional text-centered approaches, this theory posits that individual engagement with a text generates unique meanings (Beach, 1993). To further elaborate, Beach's framework categorizes reader responses into five types: textual, experiential, psychological, social, and cultural. Each type highlights distinct ways in which readers interact with texts. Similarly, as Culler (1980) observed, this approach democratizes literary analysis by validating diverse interpretations influenced by each reader's unique context.

Beach's Five Response Types

Richard Beach's framework identifies five distinct response types that reflect the multifaceted ways readers engage with texts. These response types—textual, experiential, psychological, social, and cultural highlight that reading is not a singular or uniform process.

a. Textual Response

Textual responses focus on reader involvement with structure and form. Readers in this response focus on genre norms, narrative tactics, symbolism, tone, and other literary strategies. Like formalist criticism, this approach views the text as a self-contained work that its form and content can be studied without context. For instance, a reader may assess how mystery novel foreshadowing increases suspense or how first-person narration affects their perspective. Readers discover patterns, ideas, and approaches that shape a work by focusing on these structural elements. These comments show how a text's fundamental properties can guide readers' interpretations, exposing meaning (Beach, 1993).

b. Experiential Response

Readers' experiential responses improve the story's meaning by connecting it to their lives, memories, and emotions. Readers use their experiences to understand events, characters, and surroundings, frequently resulting in strong emotional connections. Those who have suffered loss may relate more to a character suffering with sadness, while those who have traveled may relate to an adventure and discovery story. Experiential responses let readers relate to characters and explore personal topics, making reading more meaningful. This reaction recognizes that each reader's experiences shape their understanding and make literature relatable (Beach, 1993).

c. Psychological Response

Psychological responses examine readers' mental and emotional processes while reading. Readers' hidden goals, cognitive biases, and psychological frameworks affect this reaction type. Psychology readers may use theories of human behavior or Freud's id, ego, and superego to comprehend character motives and dynamics. Understanding human nature, development, and emotional intricacies influences psychological responses, allowing readers to explore deeper tale layers. This method can help readers understand characters' internal conflicts and the narrative's psychological themes by emphasizing on the mind's influence on character and reader understanding (Beach, 1993).

d. Social Response

Social reactions demonstrate how social interactions and discussions affect a reader's understanding by interpreting a text collaboratively or community-based. In book clubs, classrooms, and online communities, readers discuss and exchange viewpoints that widen their interpretations. In a Goodreads conversation, readers may explore a character's actions, themes, or cultural origins, influencing their

perspective. Social responses show that reading may be a shared experience that enriches comprehension. Community and communication affect interpretation, allowing readers to test and enhance their views based on others' emotions and insights (Beach, 1993).

e. Cultural Response

A reader's cultural background, societal norms, and historical context influence how they understand a text's themes, characters, and symbols. In this method, readers' cultural identities greatly influence text comprehension. A collectivist reader may understand a story's focus on family devotion differently from an individualist reader. Readers who value their cultural background may also relate to writings on cultural pride or struggle. Cultural answers also acknowledge that historical and socioeconomic elements affect interpretation when readers consider social issues, customs, and cultural norms. This response shows that literature interacts with readers' values and backgrounds, creating a dynamic and varied cultural understanding of the text (Beach, 1993).

Reading Engagement

The idea of reading engagement is a comprehensive paradigm that describes how readers connect with texts across different cognitive, emotional, and behavioural aspects (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). This fundamental insight has been critical in defining our current knowledge of reading behaviour. (Unrau and Quirk, 2014) go on to describe how "reading engagement theory emerged from the recognition that successful reading involves more than just cognitive skill it requires active participation and personal investment from the reader." This multidimensional perspective has transformed the way we approach reading education and evaluation. (Turner and Paris, 2017) highlight how "the theory posits that engaged reading is a state of total immersion where readers deploy strategic thinking, maintain motivated involvement, and participate in social learning communities." This level of immersion is considered critical for good reading development.

Types of Reading Engagement

a. Cognitive

Understanding and interpreting texts requires cognitive engagement. Summarisation, questioning, and conclusions help good readers understand and remember information. Students that actively use self-regulation strategies do better in reading activities (Bohn-Gettler & Rapp, 2014). Reading requires great mental effort, indicating cognitive engagement. Cognitive engagement improves understanding and retention (Muis et al., 2015). Readers must integrate new information with their prior knowledge to make sense of texts. The reader's past knowledge and beliefs about the material affect this integration (Bohn-Gettler, 2019).

b. Emotional

Emotional engagement encompasses the feelings and attitudes that readers experience while interacting with texts. Affective responses play a critical role in shaping reading behaviors; emotions such as interest, enjoyment, or frustration can significantly impact a reader's motivation to engage with a text. Positive emotions are associated with increased motivation and persistence during reading tasks, while negative emotions may lead to disengagement (Bohn-Gettler & Rapp, 2014). Moreover, belonging or connection to the material can enhance emotional engagement. Readers who feel that a text resonates with their experiences or interests are more likely to engage deeply (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). Significantly, emotional states can affect cognitive processes during reading; for example, anxiety can impair comprehension and recall by diverting cognitive resources away from the task (Muis et al., 2015). Conversely, positive emotional states can facilitate better learning outcomes by promoting deeper cognitive processing.

c. Behavioral processes

An engaged reader's activities show their involvement with a text. Participating in reading conversations, annotations, or collaborative learning shows behavioural engagement. Students who engage behaviourally perform better academically (Edutopia, 2021). Student perseverance is another important aspect of behavioural engagement; persistent students are more likely to build reading resilience and overcome difficult text challenges (Bohn-Gettler & Rapp, 2014). Due to negative self-evaluations or performance concerns, kids with reading challenges often exhibit off-task behaviour, which can suggest disengagement. This detachment can hurt their reading and academic achievement.

Online Reading Communities

Since its founding in 2007, "Goodreads, a well-known social media tool for readers, has fundamentally changed the scene of literary interaction. Now ranking among the top book-centered websites, Goodreads links over 125 million users to a database spanning over 2.6 billion book titles and 90 million reviews. People may express their ideas using reviews, ratings, and discussion groups, so building a dynamic community transcends conventional solo reading. Albrechtslund (2019) notes that Goodreads encourages a sense of community and cooperative interpretation among readers, which is more important for literary participation in the digital age. Unlike in the past, when reading was sometimes considered a solitary hobby, sites like Goodreads reinvent this experience by including social events that inspire users to connect over common interests and insights. Readers can join debates, comment on reviews, and participate in reading challenges, encouraging the study of many genres and extending the reading experience.

Goodreads' interactive tools let readers investigate several viewpoints on literary works, enhancing their respect through community involvement. Users participate in a group critique that improves personal and shared knowledge by talking about theme components, character motives, and story developments. Albrechtslund (2019) underlines that these encounters expose readers to concepts they might need help to come across, leading to a more complex view of literature. By letting writers advertise their books, engage in Q&A sessions, and organize giveaways that establish an easily available link for readers, sites like Goodreads also help to close the distance between readers and writers. Goodreads has undergone explosive expansion since Amazon acquired it in 2013, and the platform's impact is further enhanced by Amazon's connection of Goodreads reviews with Amazon product sites. Through specialized discussion groups and reading challenges, Goodreads also creates an environment where readers may connect over niche genres, set personal reading goals, and engage in friendly competition, thus enhancing individual knowledge and collective literary appreciation.

Howl's Moving Castle

"Being born the eldest of three is a horrible curse in Ingary, where seven-league boots and cloaks of invisibility do exist. Everyone knows you're the first to fail, and the worst if all three of you attempt" (Jones 1). Thus begins *Howl's Moving Castle* (1986), a children's fantasy tale by Diana Wynne Jones (1934-2011). From the first scene, we are transported to a fantasy world where fate appears predetermined and things are organised in a way that feels both familiar and foreign. The book begins with the phrase 'once upon

a time', but readers will recognise familiar patterns such as the tragic inevitability of the eldest of three children, the appearance of magical objects like seven-league boots, and the idea of setting out on a journey to seek one's fortune, all of which remind them of childhood stories. At the same time, the author's unambiguous enumeration of these aspects implies a deliberate effort to attract the reader's attention to them. This familiarity lasts throughout the narrative.

3. METHOD

This study will employ a qualitative descriptive technique. Qualitative approaches provide the instruments required to investigate the nuances (e.g., nature and contradictions) of human behaviour (e.g., beliefs, perceptions, and behaviours) and interactions while capturing their complexity (breadth and depth) (Lim et al., 2023). According to Hennick, Hutter, and Baily (2011), qualitative research is the most appropriate option. Data sources were gathered through a sampling technique from reader comments on the novel Howl's Moving Castle on the Goodreads app. Reader answers were collected from one reader per month during the previous year, yielding 60 samples for this study. The data will be examined based on reader response theory and reader engagement.

4. RESULT & DISCUSSION

Table 1. Types of Reader Response

No.	Types of Reader Response	Number	Percentage
1	Textual Response	13	27,08%
2	Experiential Response	16	33,33%
3	Psychological Response	10	20,83%
4	Social Response	6	12,50%
5	Cultural Response	3	6,25%
Total		48	100%

Textual Responses

"The writing style is interesting. Nothing is explained for you; you have to figure it out."

— Marry H, August 27, 2024

This comment highlights the reader's recognition of the deliberate ambiguity in Diana Wynne Jones's narrative style. Marry H engages in *monitoring for sound reasoning* by evaluating how the lack of explicit explanation impacts their reading experience. By noting the "mystery-solving" aspect of the text, the reviewer reflects on the cognitive

effort required to piece together narrative elements, demonstrating an appreciation for the technical challenges posed by the author's writing. And the critical thinking aspect in this response is the reviewer self-corrects by revisiting missed details, signaling active engagement in refining their interpretation.

Experiential Responses

"Reading it felt like having a warm cup of tea on a Sunday afternoon."

— Dia, May 6, 2024

Dia's comment reflects an emotional and sensory reaction to the text, likening the reading experience to the comfort of a relaxing activity. This response is indicative of *reflexivity*, as the reader connects their personal feelings with the overall atmosphere created by the narrative. The warmth and simplicity described reflect a positive emotional engagement with the whimsical and low-stakes elements of the book. The critical thinking in this response pictured by articulating how the tone and pacing evoke a particular mood, the reader demonstrates an ability to analyze how emotional responses shape their overall perception of the text.

Psychological Responses

"Sophie's character really resonates with me."

— Gloriana, August 28, 2024

Gloriana's review showcases a strong connection to Sophie, the protagonist. This response illustrates *monitoring for sound reasoning* as the reviewer reflects on Sophie's struggles and growth, comparing them to their personal experiences. The statement highlights the emotional and psychological depth of the character, prompting an introspective connection. The critical thinking in this response is the ability to draw parallels between fictional and real-life experiences reflects higher-order thinking, where readers integrate the text into their self-concept and worldview.

Social Responses

"I loved comparing the book to the Studio Ghibli adaptation."

— Caroline Lambert, October 27, 2024

Caroline's comparison of the book to its Studio Ghibli adaptation highlights a social dimension of reading, where shared cultural texts foster communal discussions. This response reflects *self-correction* as the reviewer actively evaluates differences in storytelling across media, considering how these adaptations influence their narrative perception. Critical thinking: The ability to critique and compare multiple interpretations of a text reflects an analytical approach to understanding diverse storytelling methods.

Cultural Responses

"A classic and cultural touchpoint for a reason!"

— Nicole Connolly, November 12, 2024

Nicole's statement underscores the book's impact as a "cultural touchpoint," reflecting on its significance within the broader literary canon and popular culture. This response demonstrates *reflexivity* as the reviewer situates the text within a larger societal and historical context, considering how its themes and characters resonate universally. The critical thinking in this response pictured by acknowledging the book's cultural legacy, the reader engages in higher-order thinking, appreciating its thematic depth and enduring relevance.

Table 2. Types of Reader Engaement

No.	Types of Reader Engagement	Number	Percentage
1	Cognitive Engagement	22	50%
2	Emotional Engagement	16	36,4%
3	Behavioral Engagement	6	13,6%
Total		44	100%

Cognitive Engagement

"The writing style is interesting. Nothing is explained for you, you have to figure it out."

— Signe, June 12, 2024

Signe's reflection highlights the intellectual challenge the text presents, emphasizing its reliance on the reader's ability to infer details. This fosters active engagement as readers must connect scattered elements to understand the story. By appreciating the implicit nature of the narrative, Signe demonstrates reflexivity and self-monitoring. Her observation about figuring things out aligns with Horenstein's notion of effective critical thinking, which requires readers to construct meaning actively.

Emotional Engagement

"Howl's drama queen moments were hilarious."

— Makayla Blackford Crandall, April 20, 2024

Makayla's comment highlights her emotional reaction to Howl's over-the-top personality traits, particularly his "drama queen" moments. This kind of response demonstrates a strong emotional engagement with the text, as she connects personally to the character's actions and behavior. Humor, as an emotional response, is often a reflection of the reader's enjoyment or amusement, which in this case, is directed at Howl's exaggerated antics. The use of the word "hilarious" signals not just mild amusement but

a deep emotional involvement, suggesting that the humour in Howl's character plays a significant role in Makayla's reading experience. The critical thinking aspect here lies in her ability to reflect on Howl's dramatic moments as a central feature of his character, her emotional engagement with these moments goes beyond a simple emotional reaction; it indicates a nuanced understanding of Howl's role in the story.

Behavioral Engagement:

"I'm planning to re-read this one at some point."

— Esther Knopp, May 22, 2024

Esther's comment about planning to re-read *Howl's Moving Castle* highlights a key aspect of behavioral engagement: the active decision to revisit the text. Her intention to read the book again suggests that the narrative has had a strong enough impact on her to warrant a second engagement. Re-reading is an indication of deeper interest and involvement with the book, as it implies that Esther anticipates uncovering more insights, appreciating the story from a different perspective, or simply enjoying it once more. This kind of behavior suggests that she is not just passively consuming the text, but actively engaged with it in a way that fosters ongoing interaction. Esther's decision to re-read the book clearly demonstrates reflexivity, an essential component of critical thinking. Reflexivity involves reflecting on one's learning process and being open to the idea that new interpretations or understandings may arise from revisiting a text. By stating that she plans to re-read the book, Esther signals an awareness that additional layers of meaning or enjoyment may emerge upon closer or repeated examination. This suggests that she is not satisfied with a single reading and recognizes the potential for deeper comprehension.

Goodreads reviews of *Howl's Moving Castle* provide a nuanced window into readers' critical thinking literacy, revealing complex patterns of engagement across cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions. Cognitive engagement, comprising 50% of reviews, demonstrates readers' active mental effort to comprehend and interpret the text. Reviewers critically analyze plot intricacies, character development, and thematic elements, often comparing the book to its film adaptation. For instance, many highlight Sophie's transformative character arc and explore the narrative's unexplored backstories, showcasing an analytical approach to literary interpretation. One reviewer's comment, "I love how much detail went into developing Sophie's character," exemplifies this critical engagement by evaluating the author's narrative strategies and character construction.

Emotional engagement (36.4%) and behavioral engagement (13.6%) further illuminate readers' critical thinking processes. Emotional responses reveal how readers'

feelings shape their interpretation, with reviewers expressing a range of reactions from whimsical delight to narrative frustration. These emotional encounters prompt self-reflection and encourage readers to examine their own interpretative frameworks. Behavioral engagement is manifested through actions like re-reading, discussing the text, and revisiting complex narrative sections—strategies that demonstrate a commitment to refining understanding. Reviewers who intend to re-read the book or discuss its nuances illustrate an active approach to literary comprehension. This multilayered engagement underscores how critical thinking is not a static process but a dynamic interaction between readers, text, and personal interpretation, where cognitive analysis, emotional resonance, and reflective actions continuously inform and reshape understanding.

5. CONCLUSION

The study of reader responses to "Howl's Moving Castle" on Goodreads reveals a complex and multifaceted approach to literary engagement. By applying Beach's reader-response theory and analyzing 48 reader reviews, the research uncovered diverse response types, with experiential responses (33.33%) and textual responses (27.08%) dominating the analysis. The findings demonstrate that readers engage with the text through cognitive (50%), emotional (36.4%), and behavioral (13.6%) dimensions, highlighting the dynamic nature of literary interpretation in the digital age. Furthermore, this research contributes to our understanding of reading engagement in online communities, specifically how platforms like Goodreads transform reading from a solitary activity to a collaborative experience. The study illuminates how readers critically interact with texts, drawing personal connections, analyzing narrative techniques, and situating the work within broader cultural contexts. By examining the nuanced ways readers respond to "Howl's Moving Castle," the research underscores the importance of reader-response theory in comprehending the rich, interactive landscape of contemporary literary consumption, where individual experiences and collective interpretations continuously shape our understanding of literary works.

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