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Hey Engine, How Does That Make You Feel?

I apologize for the tardiness of our guest today. Professor Niedenfeurer has phoned me from his hot air balloon trip, Around the World in a Week, and said he will be here sometime soon. As for right now, we will continue on with our study of past participles and coordinating conjunctions in terms of relevance to nutrition labels. *Knock knock*. Excuse me class. This could be Professor Niedenfeurer. Ah, it is. Welcome Professor. I assume you are ready to start.

I'm Professor Tom Niedenfeurer. The reason I was late is because I was ballooning around the world in a week and we got held up for a day because I lost our compass. After a severe beating from my crew, I decided that the only way to get back was to eyeball it. We eyeballed it from Jakarta all the way back to your football stadium. I got off the balloon just fifteen minutes ago, but I had to go to the bathroom before I came here so I would have been on time. Ah well, what are you going to do? Here is my glittering resume. I graduated from Stanford with a masters in English Literature with a minor in Physical Education. I fused the two together to come up with my current vocation as the head of the English Department at the University of Sydney. I mostly lecture on poetic justice in government and, every once in a while, we go play a game of kickball or "boot the spherical object" as they call it. I've written a book on writing college papers in one night while watching various athletic events. Surprisingly, my book has been on New York's ~~Best Sellers List~~ for ten years now. I guess it's done it's job. Enough about me. I'm here to tell you a bedtime story about a train and how she felt when faced with a tough task. That task was getting up the hill. This story will be told

through the eyes and ears of me, a Reader Response Critic. The story is The Little Engine That Could.

In order for you to understand the Reader Response critique of the story, you must first understand what Reader Response Criticism is. Gregg Tatarka, professor of Theology at Notre Dame University, defines Reader Response Criticism as a “form of criticism focusing on the relationship between the text and the reader with emphasis on the ways which the reader participates in the text.” I flew over Notre Dame on my way here when we overshot the Midwest and ended up in Albany. It’s beautiful. What this means to you and me is that this criticism focuses on how the text affects you. Formalists will focus on the diction or actual words of the text while we focus on what the words mean to us. Did you hear that? I said dic-tion. Have any of you ever studied Freudian Slips? If not, that was a huge one. Oh my gosh, listen to me. Now talking about huge diction slips. Lets have a break so I can settle back down. See what eight days straight in a balloon does to you! (Ten minutes later). Now back to business class. We, Reader Response Critics, emphasize and look deeply into how we felt before, during, and after reading the piece. An example would be how your feelings changed on the Holocaust after seeing Schindler’s List. In my personal experience, the movie changed my views of the Holocaust after watching it. That movie, and books like Night, are wonderful examples of letting words and images take over your emotions. We believe that the words we read give us insight into the authors mind when writing the piece. We try to put ourselves in their shoes and understand where they’re coming from. We try to find personal connections so that the work can relate to our lives. If we can successfully do that, we will then allow the message or moral of the work to affect us. Johanna Smith, editor of Mary Shelley: Frankenstein, says that we look for as many answers as possible and none are wrong (353). Gut feelings can’t be wrong. It can be summed up by a phrase I’ve heard often since my senior year in high school. Take what you like and leave the rest. Much like the young man in the back with a gallon of drool on his desk is doing right now.

He's taking what he wants, a nap, and leaving the rest, my lecture. Miss, could you please hit him with the back of your hand please? Back to me. This means that you let the things that hit profoundly do so. You might highlight them or mark up the pages to remind you that those words moved you. The things that don't move you get left behind for you to look at later. When you try to put yourself in the author's shoes and let things affect you without screening them first, you have started your ascent in understanding the true meaning of Reader Response Criticism.

Although edited by Olive Miller, the author who wrote The Little Engine That Could did so with a Reader Response type goal in mind. Lets review the story now that you know what you are looking for. There was a train of cars that were delivering Christmas toys for the boys and girls of the city the story took place. I don't really know or care. The train was going along fine until the engine died. It could not move an inch. How did this make the engine feel? The engine felt sad. See, this isn't hard. I guess the train cars felt sad even though they are inanimate objects, but we'll pretend. The train was stuck. As they waited, three engines came along and all dissed the engine by denying their plea for help. "It's not my business," roared the Great Strong Engine, "I can't be bothered with you!" (Miller, 202). Then the Big Freight Engine came along and said that he was too tired to pull any more. I guess the Big Freight Engine felt that he couldn't handle any more. He's a pretty sissy Big Freight Engine in my mind. Then the Rusty, Dusty, Dingy Engine came chugging along moaning and groaning about how his axles hurt like a $\beta!+(\#$ and how he couldn't possibly pull that train of cars. He chanted, "I never could, I never could, I never could!" (Miller 202). The stranded engine and cars now began to lose all hope of ever getting those toys to the children. Just as they were about to start on fire so the owner could collect their insurance, the Little Engine came prancing along the track whistling a gay tune. Hey, what are you two laughing about in the back? Oh, I get it. Trains can't whistle tunes, that's it isn't it? What was that? Oh, you're laughing at gay tunes. You must think you're funnyman Bob Hope or something. Come

on people, can't you be mature for even one minute, seriously! As I was saying, the Little Train rolled to a stop as the toy train asked for help. Now, the Little Train was a rookie and had never pulled a real life toy train before. But she thought of the children and the attention back at the trainhouse from all the upperclassengine. Then she came straight up to the train, caught hold and started to pull (Miller, 2006). At this point her mind was repeating: "I hope I can, I hope I can, I hope I can." After refueling with a case of Power Bars, the Little Train began to create enough torque-force to overcome the inertia, Newton's first law that states that objects at rest tend to stay at rest unless acted upon by an outside force, of the train cars and began to accelerate up the tracks slowly but surely. She began to gain more speed and started to puff: "I think I can, I think I can, I think I can." Up ahead she saw a hill and puffed up that hill and crested it to find a city waiting for those Christmas toys. As she used gravity to pull her down the hill, she puffed: "I knew I could, I knew I could, I knew I could!" They got their toys. Now that we all have fallen asleep, but magically understand that the moral is to perseverer and you will succeed, we can move on.

Now that we've gone over why salt isn't necessary in cooking fine pasta, defining Reader Response Criticism, and our story, we can now analyze how they intertwine. First and foremost, salt is like the Republic of Ireland in some ways. We'll talk about that later though. A Reader Response Critic would focus most on the abandonment felt by the train cars and the original engine. The engine would also feel inferior to, and embarrassed by, the engines passing by. A critic would put themselves on the engine's tracks and try to imagine how they would feel if they let down the group they were leading, and the people affected by the group, like the kids. If you were in that kind of situation, you could certainly sympathize with the engine that stalled when the other engines blew him off. Whenever you are down and people ignore you or act as if they're too good for you, you tend to give up hope easily. The author did a great job of making the engines struggle and any of yours able to coincide. You are just going along in life and for what ever reason,

you are stopped dead in your tracks. The Reader Response Critic would certainly relate to the engines problem and hope for a miracle. The other engines were obviously capable of simply lifting up one little finger and pull the toys, but they didn't. A critic would relate that to the people around you that could simply loan you that needed thousand dollars or easily cover your shift for you. You should be able to realize that you could, one day, be those capable engines that could help out the stuck engine. You should feel sorry for the original engine, animosity, yes animosity, towards the others, and thankfulness towards the Little Engine. The Little Engine did what few of us would: she took a risk and help out a friend with something that looked impossible. The attitude conveyed in the Little Engine's actions is one that all of us can be affected by. She wouldn't quit, she persevered, and succeeded. Hopefully, all of you were thinking that same thing during the retelling of the story. The Little Train was obviously elated to coast down that mountain and proud that she had proven to herself and the other engines that she was worth something. That sense of accomplishment should be felt by all that succeed at a task whether it be writing last minute papers, pulling cars full of toys, finishing a marathon, or traveling around the world. A Reader Response Critic would point out, and focus on, each of those things I just told you because they all have connections with our lives. When we read a story, we should look for those connections so that we can almost be one with the author and their goal for writing the story.

Is everyone still there? There's just a few minutes left I know. In conclusion, critics are firm believers in the moral of the story and the lessons learned along the way. Simply reading the words and looking at them at face value isn't really reading the story. By viewing a piece with this type of criticism, you allow yourself to become a part of the story. I think many of you have already taken to heart the take what you want and leave the rest comment. If not, do so, for it gives you another outlook on life in between the lines. Those lines lead to a whole new way of living. But I can't tell you what it is. I'd think you'd have a gut feeling by now. Get it feeling.

Works Cited

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