

Reader Response Criticism



Reader Response Criticism: Where Did It Come From?

- Basically, functions as a response to classical and new criticism, which held that the text was the center of analysis.
 - From the time of Plato to that of the Romantics, critics focused on finding meaning solely in the text and in adherence to form.
 - For a brief period starting in the early 19th century (the Romantics) the focus shifted to the author as a genius who saw truths the average person could not.
 - Then back to the text with the **New Critics**, who saw the text as an objective object whose meaning could be uncovered through study. TRUTH exists in the text, if one looks hard enough to find it.
- New Critics believed that a text was an **autotelic artifact**, something complete with in itself, written for its own sake, unified in its form and not dependent on its relation to the author's life or intent, history, or anything else.
- New Critics believed that a person could evaluate and analyze a text while remaining immune to one's own culture, background, status, and even personality.
- For the new critic, it would be wrong to focus on the effect on the reader. William K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley called the **Affective Fallacy**--the fallacy of confusing a work of literature with its effects on the reader.



Reader Response Criticism Explained

- **Reader + Text=Meaning**
- Literature is a performative art and each reading is a performance, analogous to playing/singing a musical work, enacting a drama, etc. Literature exists only when it is read; meaning is an event.
- Reader Response Criticism is rooted in the branch of philosophy known as **Phenomenology**, which can be basically defined as "method of inquiry based on the premise that reality consists of objects and events as they are perceived or understood in human consciousness and not of anything independent of human consciousness." In other words, knowledge does not exist in the external world, but only in one's mental perception of the external world.
- The literary text possesses no fixed and final meaning or value; there is no one "correct" meaning. Literary meaning and value are "transactional," "dialogic," created by the interaction of the reader and the text.
- Reading is an incredibly energetic act. The reader does not wait for meaning to announce itself, but guesses, arranges details, speculates, closes gaps, and contends with "indeterminacies."
- Each reader comes to a text within the framework of her **horizons of expectation**. A text will constantly challenge these expectations, moving the reader to a series of unique positions relative to the text.

Sample Passage

Strangers parted as if to make room for him.

There he stood. He was there in the aisle, a few yards away, watching her.

She leaned forward at once in her seat, her hand jerked up to her face as if to ward off a blow--but then the crowd in the aisle hid him, he was gone. She pressed both hands against her cheeks. He was not there, she had imagined him.

Reader Response Criticism



Wolfgang Iser's Three Readers

- The Real Reader-the actual person reading the text, with all of her cultural experiences.
- The Virtual Reader-the one that the author assumes is reading the book.
- The Ideal Readerthe best prepared and most knowledgeable readers.

Louise Rosenblatt

"A poem is what the reader lives through under the guidance of the text and experiences as relevant to the text."

- Wrote Literature as Exploration in 1937, pushing Reader Response Criticism to the forefront.
- She argued that there were two types of reading:
 - **Efferent**: the search for newly gained information, not the words themselves
 - **Aesthetic**: the desire to experience the text, its sounds, words, and patterns
- When reading, the reader and the text share a **transactional experience**. Simultaneously, the text:
 - Is a stimulus for past experiences, thoughts, and ideas of the reader
 - And a blueprint for selecting, ordering, limiting ideas that best match the text.
- The result? A New Creation, which has a limited, but not exclusive number of plausible interpretations.

Stanley Fish (Affective Stylistics)

- Meaning is not something extracted from a text, but negotiated, line by line. Meaning is what happens to readers.
- Readers create a piece of literature as they read it.
- The text, according to Fish, as an independent director of interpretation, disappears.
- Readers divide themselves into **interpretive communities**, who tend to read for the same meanings in literature. Some of these interpretive communities are the same communities that we have discussed as schools of literary criticism.

Criticism of Reader Response Criticism

- Text-oriented critics argue that Reader Response is nothing more than a form of anarchic subjectivity that allows readers to interpret a text any way they want.
- Another objection is the idea that Reader Response criticism seems to undervalue the idea that a text can provide new understanding for a reader.
- E.D. Hirsch argues in Validity in Interpretation that while we cannot know for certain what a writer intended in his/her work, our interpretation must be constrained by **probable intent**. If one intended, for example, to argue that "Araby" was a critique of European colonialism, he/she would have to contend with the enormous evidence that the story is primarily concerned with religious themes.