

## Revisiting Reader Response Theory

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### ABSTRACT

The role of readers in literary studies was not prominently recognized and actualized in the conventional practice. The focus was on the writer both as the creator of literary texts and interpreter of literary texts. The writer was the source of creative writing and its meaning. The reader was totally sidelined and was at the receiving end throughout the Middle Ages. It was not until the first half of the modern period that the reader's role started getting attention. The reader-oriented criticism gained currency in Europe and America during 1970s. However, it is significant to note that it had its origins in antiquity and the ancient masters had attended upon the role of readers with varying emphasis. The present paper is an attempt to explain the resurgence of interest in the role of readers in modern theoretical parlance and the readers' prominence in meaning making process. It illustrates the trajectory of readers' role in literary studies and shows how readers became increasingly important in the consideration of literary texts.

**Keywords:** *Reader response theory, reception theory, reader, writer, text, meaning, interpretation, phenomenology, hermeneutics, analysed, dasien, Hans Robert Jauss, Wolfgang Iser, Stanley Fish.*

### Introduction

Reader response theory as a mode of reading literary texts is pluralistic and radical. It is not monolithic; it does offer several different perspectives wherein reader's role is underscored. Redear response critics, as Jane Tompkins puts it, are, "willing to share their critical authority with less tutored readers and at the same time to go into partnership with psychologists, linguists, philosophers and other students of mental functioning" (223:1980). It is very insightful to understand this critical mode from this open ended and pluralistic viewpoint. The role of readers was taken into consideration in the ancient period. Plato and Aristotle were concerned about the reader's (audience) responses to artwork. Plato was more concerned about

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the unethical impacts on audience created by reading poetry or witnessing a play. Readers, for Plato, may nurture wrong concepts about the gods and divert themselves from the rational behaviour necessary for knowing truth. As opposed to this, Aristotle stressed the positive influence of literature on audience as it helps them achieve the emotional balance. A lot of authors from antiquity and the Middle Ages saw literature as a subset of rhetoric, or the craft of writing or speaking persuasively. Accordingly, critics practiced rhetorical criticism, where they focused on techniques, devices and strategies used by writers to invoke emotional as well as rational responses. The same concern about the impact of poetry on readers' mind can also be seen in the Romantic era. Symbolism and impressionism, the 19th century aesthetic theories, primarily emphasized the reader's personal answer to the work of art. Denying the claims of textual objectivity, even Marxism and feminism considered literary texts always in link with social structures and its impact on class and gender. However, all these concern about readers do not grant any active role to them. Readers are perceived as passively absorbing literature and allow its content and style to dominate their emotions and thoughts. Before the full version of reader-oriented criticism could arrive on the critical scene, there were some assuring efforts made in the direction of assigning readers a prime role in the interpretation process. The first significant contribution came from I. A. Richards. Though modern critics, he led emphasis not just on textual study but on the active engagement of readers in bringing meaning/s to the text. However, Richard's approach to it was more communication-based and to some extent, psychological. His notion of pseudo-statements highlights the idea of personally accepted vision of the world, which is necessary for the psychological health of an individual. Richards developed affective system for literary analysis, which gave more weightage to readers' emotional responses. Later on, Richards attached the contextual dimension to the reading process, whereby a reader brings a series of ideas based on his/her life experiences. Life experiences help readers to authenticate or refute representation in the text. Though Richard did not accord a sacred role to the reader, yet he was the first to recognize the significance of the reader in the study of literature. Along with Richards, writer-critics like Virginia Woolf, Louise Rosenblatt, and Wayne Booth have referred to elements in text that guide readers and their responses. Louise Rosenblatt (1904-2005), an American theorist, made a noteworthy contribution in taking forward I.A. Richards' emphasis on context in the reading process. Her work, *Literature as Exploration* (1938) highlights the need for the collaborative work between the text and the reader for generating meaning. For Rosenblatt, a literary text is not an autonomous entity, and it cannot be approached objectively by readers. According to her

analysis, there are numerous potential individual readers for numerous individual texts. It simply means that readers bring their past events, present issues, memories, desires, physical conditions and personal attributes while reading a text. Her path-breaking transactional reader-response theory came with the publication of *The Reader, the Text, the Poem: The Transactional Theory of Literary Work* (1978), wherein the dynamic role of readers was emphasized. She does not place the text in an inferior position but claims that the text and the reader share a transactional experience. The text works as a stimulus to invoke past experiences, memories, emotions and thoughts in a reader's mind while reading. The text keeps correcting readers' interpretation as earlier passages are revisited in the light of new development. Thus, the text provides a roadmap or a blueprint to its readers and helps in selecting, confining and ordering her/his responses. On the other hand, a reader broadens the textual (fictitious) world by attaching to it her/his real-life experiences. By indulging into such give and take, the text and the reader generate a new creation, which Rosenblatt calls as 'poem.' In Rosenblatt's view, a new 'poem' is a result of such aesthetic transaction that takes place during the reading process. This 'new' poem is not a fixed and permanent thing but gets created each time when the reader interacts with the text. She further elaborates two ways of reading—efferent reading and aesthetic reading. Efferent reading is done to find some information. The readers, in such type, are more concerned with what information they can 'carry away' from the text. As against this, aesthetic reading favours, not information, but experience. Readers engage in words and sound patterns, structure, style, syntax of the text. Rather than collecting any information, readers are excited about their unique 'lived-through' experience with the text. A reader continuously shifts between these two ways while reading a literary text. For Rosenblatt, meaning of a literary text or a 'poem' is not infinite interpretations but transactional experience. During this process, many different, unconventional and even unexpected meanings would emerge. Rosenblatt's analysis altogether added a different dimension to the reading process. Thus, critics and philosophers from Richards and Rosenblatt were chiefly responsible for diverting attention of critical practices towards readers. A way was prepared for next generation of reader-oriented critics in this manner. It is quite clear that how the focus slowly but assuredly shifted towards the readers.

### **Background**

Apart from the efforts made by the writers and critics since the beginning of 20th century, reader-response theory received its orientation from two currents, namely phenomenology and

hermeneutics. Phenomenology is concerned with the study of how the world is understood by human beings, whereas hermeneutics is related with textual analysis, especially those texts dealing with human acts, products and life. Practitioners of phenomenology believe that it is our perception that shapes our understanding of the world, i.e. we construct certain ideas about the world and that there are certain cognitive structures in our mind through which we come to know about the world. On the other hand, hermeneutics deals with the strategies, modes, models, and theories of interpretation. Both mainly focus the assessment of perception and an explanation of the world and human life. The element of subjectivity was brought into the act of interpretation. Phenomenology, as a philosophical movement, emerged in the late 19th century and it combined social theory with psychology. German theorist, Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) founded this movement. The Greek word phenomenon means “appearance.” Phenomenology emphasizes the study of how objects from the external world ‘appear’ to the human beings than the objects themselves. His essay, “Pure Phenomenology, its Method and its Field of Investigation” (1917) puts forward his philosophical views on how humans perceive the world. Husserl argues that our understanding of the external reality cannot be sure, but we definitely are aware about our own perception. Human beings are sure about the ways in which they construct their world. Husserl points out that when an object ‘appears’ before us, we look at it from above, below, near, far, and even from past or present. Thus, multiple intuitions of the same object formulate the unity of one continuous consciousness. Husserl highlights the process where consciousness that classifies and arranges the world of objects and phenomena. Husserl distinguishes between “phenomena” and “objects.” Objects are external and strange to consciousness just like all natural objects, Phenomena consists of elements and processes of consciousness itself. Objects are studied by pure sciences whereas phenomena are analyzed by phenomenology. The real task of such criticism is to analyze how the world around us is constructed through multiple acts of consciousness. In phenomenology, how the perceiver perceives, receives, conceives, notes, and understands becomes significant. For phenomenologist, not the actual object but how perception about those objects is created by humans is more important. It indicates to an elementary viewpoint that the human mind is the center and source of all meaning. Husserl laid down the foundation for reception theory and influenced the Geneva School of Phenomenology, which included critics like Georges Poulet and Jean Starobinski. Another formidable influence that brought the perceiver or reader in focus was that of Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), a German philosopher and well-known for his contribution in existential philosophy. He was Husserl’s disciple but did not approve

Husserl's insistence on the perceiver for creating meaning of things. For Heidegger, knowing world is not a one-sided process; it is not just human perception that shapes our understanding of the world, but it is also the world, in turn, which has a considerable amount of influence over us. He contends that while the world projects itself onto the perceiver's mind (consciousness), his thinking is likewise influenced by the outside world. His seminal works on literary theory are *The Origin of the Work of Art* (1935), *Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry* (1936) and *Language* (1950). He argues what makes human existence different is its *dasein* or givenness. His analysis asserts that human consciousness is always a consciousness of something, it is never empty. He further claims that human consciousness projects things from the external world and simultaneously gets affected by the existence of the world. This activity of human mind is referred as *noesis* or intentionality. Readers' consciousness is thus not free from objects, but it carries objects. Every reader, according to Heidegger, always thinks in a situation or context. It is through space and time that the world exerts its influence over us. We are situated in a particular world where space and time govern us, and our interpretation of the world is further governed by this 'situatedness' in the world. Therefore, thinking is always historical, however this history is inner, personal and not social or external. Readers' consciousness, therefore, is always located in a certain place and time. Ultimately this situated consciousness affects readers' understanding of everything, including the literary text. Hence, no view of the world and no interpretation of text are free from the time and place contexts. Heidegger's views influenced thinkers like Gadamer and provided timely boost to reader-response criticism. Another formidable influence on reader-response theory was of a German philosopher, Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002), who played a key role in the development of 20th century hermeneutics. *Truth and Method* (1975) was his application of Heidegger's situational method to literary theory. He maintained that literary creations have several meanings when they are created. The interpreter's historical context determines the meaning. According to Gadamer, the symbolic nature of literary work allows it to convey something 'more' than what is 'presented' to readers. As a result, a literary work opens a space in which the world (reality) and readers' existence are brought together in totality. The readers, while experiencing literature, are not just given moments of vision but allow them to dwell with literary work for 'autonomous' time. Gadamer proposed a notion of 'fusion of horizons' whereby the text as well as the reader's perspective is acknowledged. Both authors and readers come from different backgrounds. They cannot erase the historical, cultural, gender, class experiences completely and merge into totally new system. Literature also gets evolved through

specific conditions. For Gadamer, text is not 'individual' entity with some inherent meaning but a product of a tradition of interpretation. The reader's perspective is also influenced by past events and experienced. During the literary exchange, horizons of text and readers fuse with each other. Gadamer thus denied that literary works had an inherent meaning and brought the interpreter and his historical situation in focus. Therefore, the emergence of readers' role in literary interpretation can be traced to I.A. Richards to Gadamer, bring attitudinal transformation through philosophical orientation as well as practical application. In addition to this, the post-structural ways of interpretation texts denied notions like objectivity and universality. They radically pronounced 'disappearance and death' of author and it indirectly boosted the reader-response theory.

### **Reader Response Theorists**

As stated earlier, there were unorganized, yet crucial attempts had been made to bring readers at centre. However, no concrete theory was formulated until the second half of the 20th century. The major breakout in this direction came in the early 1970s with establishment of the Constance School of Reception Aesthetics at the University of Constance in West Germany. The members of this school turned away from traditional methods that emphasized either the production of text or textual elements. Instead, they focused on the reading and reception of literary texts. The approach developed by this school that is generally known as the 'aesthetics of reception' or reception theory was complementary to the 'reader-response criticism' in America. Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser were two distinguished scholars who founded this school. Rainer Warning, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and Karlheinz Stierle are other important contributors from this group. This school was chiefly responsible for giving a strong theoretical foundation to reception theory. Hans Robert Jauss (1921–1997) blended the principles of Russian Formalism and social theories and gave text as well as history the equal importance in literary interpretation. Inspired by the ideas of German philosopher Roman Ingarden, Jauss states that critics must examine how any (literary) text is received and understood by its contemporary readers. He also claims that readers from a particular period work out their own set of principles to judge a work. Jauss came up with the notion of horizon of expectations. This notion builds on the idea that the reader has certain expectations and that he does not approach the text uninformed. Readers bring in their biography, their formative influences, their contexts, and their past experiences to the text. According to Jauss, the meeting of the text and the reader is, therefore, not uninformed or unsituated. This line of thought was a step ahead

of what Heidegger earlier argued. Jauss further argues that how any text is evaluated from one historical period to another necessarily changes. The horizon of expectations, meaning/s and significance of each text is determined by the particular historical era, and hence, they are not fixed or universal. Readers from late 18th and early 19th century would look differently at Neo-classical texts than readers from the same period. Readers from every period fix up the value and merit for themselves. Therefore, one cannot have fixed interpretation and final evaluation of any literary work is impossible proposition. Jauss was responsible for bringing a new outlook to reception theory in which the context, or the past experiences that the reader brings to the text are given central place. Along with Jauss, another German phenomenologist Wolfgang Iser (1926–2007) took reader-oriented criticism to new heights. For Iser, the text is not as objective as the new critics claimed it to be and it is also not entirely social as the practitioners of reception theory argued. Iser argues that any object (material one like a pen or a book, or artefact like a poem or a painting) does not mean anything until the active conscious of spectator acknowledges it. It, therefore, is difficult to divide between what is known (object) from the mind, which knows it (consciousness). When a text is read, the object and the readers are united. Hence, the critic's role is, not to decipher the text but to explain the text's effect on the reader. Iser has explained his theory of interpretation in his well-known work, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (1978). He does not look at the (literary) text as a closed, self-sufficient structure with a fixed meaning but as a site open to all kinds of interactions and possibilities. The text helps readers to revisit their experiences, whereas the reader recreates text by using his own knowledge and experiences. Iser claims that the text contains 'gaps' or 'blanks', which means that it does not reveal everything. The readers must actively engage in filling these gaps and build meaning/s. The text navigates readers through itself and the readers use their knowledge to decide where to stop and what to gather. Various types of negations (elements in the text that cancel each other out and bring the reader into the right relation with the text) are responsible for setting the interaction between the text and the reader. According to Iser, blanks in a text help to bring various perspectives together and built a structure. He identifies four major perspectives, namely the narrator, the characters, the plot and the fictitious reader. Iser has carefully analyzed the role of readers by dividing them in two categories- 'actual reader' and 'implied reader.' The actual reader is a person who physically takes up the text and reads it. While the reader takes away some impressions from the book, he or she also applies experiences from their own life to the reading. 'Implied reader' on the other hand can be defined as ideal recipient or hypothetical model to which the text is directed.

Linguistic codes, ideological influences and aesthetic ideas of this implied reader are necessary consideration if the text is to be properly understood. Implied reader is abstract and notional as compared to actual reader. Their difference can be clearly demarked while reading works from a period when social conventions and values were very different. The implied reader is in agreement with the text, as it allows itself to be dominated by the textual strategies. By creating the notion of implied reader, Iser highlights the necessity of examining the text in the interpretation activity. He also emphasizes an individual reader's response to the text by discussing about the actual reader. Iser's ideas brought about the landmark shift in literary studies. Stanley E. Fish (born, 1938), American literary theorist must be credited for popularizing reader-oriented criticism in America. He made efforts to place the reading process in the institutional context by focusing on the individual reader's experience with literary texts. With reader-response theory, the perceiver becomes the reader. The perceiver is to reception theory what the reader is to reader-response theory. Fish is famous for his works including *The Reader in "Paradise Lost"* (1967), the essay "Interpreting the Variorum" (1976) and trend-setting book, *Is There a Text in this Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (1979). He developed strategies of reading and interpreting texts, famously known as affective stylistics or reception aesthetics. 'Affective' refers to the impression that the text can have on the reader and with stylistics, he was trying to bring some formalistic issues into consideration. Fish took Milton's poems for analysis to draw attention towards the controversies over meaning. Attempts by critics to decide 'correct' reading will always fail because of the wrong assumption that meaning is embedded in the text itself. According to Fish, the focus of reading and interpretation activities of literature is transferred from the text to its readers. Meaning is not associated with textual elements but with readers' experience. However, Fish safeguards against the uncontrolled subjective scope for interpreting literary text. Readers for Fish are not ordinary readers but 'informed readers' who know literary conventions and a part of reading community. Meaning of a literary text is located in these groups that share linguistic and cultural codes or what Fish calls the interpretive communities. This theory of interpretive communities was based on the idea of the informed reader. Fish believed that readers are informed when they read a literary text. By informed, he meant that they are aware of the intricacies of the language, the linguistic and literary conventions and practices. Thus, there is a community of informed readers who read the text and try to interpret it according to their background, their sensibilities and the contexts that they bring to the literary works. Readers are able to reach to meaning/s through his personal reading experience as a member of one or



more of these interpretive communities. Hence, Fish states that it is the reader who actively decides the form and content of the text. Fish's well-known observations about how practices and assumptions of an institution shape interpretation act are expressed in his book, *Is There a Text in this Class?* According to him, "Skilled reading is usually thought to be a matter of discerning what is there but if the example of my students is generalized, it is a matter of knowing how to produce what can thereafter be said to be there" (11:1979). For Fish, linguistic system does not determine the meaning of an utterance but rather the context of the utterance. It is impossible to think about any utterance independently without any context. Readers make sense of an utterance and identify its context simultaneously. Readers do not examine utterance first and then give it meaning. Fish argues that readers recreate the text and this happens because readers bring their own strategies to the text. Meaning generated by readers is always relative to the situation in which text is read.

To sum up, Fish states that no interaction between the text and the reader can occur in the absence of context-free system of meaning. Act of reading is influenced by a set of beliefs that are not individual specific but shaped by community conventions. Fish, thus, is important for several reasons and one of those reasons is that he was more concerned with the interpretation part of reader-response theory, and less with the phenomenological aspects of it. Along with the above-mentioned critics, other less-known critics also made their mark in reader-oriented theories. Gerald Prince, an American theorist of narratology, considered readers are abstract entities. Price calls such hypothetical readers as 'narratee', the (imaginary) person to whom the writer is addressing. Price asserts that the naratee, just like narrator, is a real character and is different from readers outside the text. Another American literary critic, Norman Holland primarily deals with hypothetical readers in his early works but later on in *Five Readers Reading* he turns his attention to actual students. Holland analyses interpretive activity by using the Freudian psychoanalysis perspective. For him, every reader personalizes her/his identity through life experiences, and it becomes a lens to look at the world. Textual reading becomes a matter of dealing with fears, desires and needs for readers. Michael Riffaterre in France, Jonathan Culler and Terrence Hawkes in America have developed the notion of literary competence. All these critics agree that mere linguistic competence is not enough to understand literary meaning and that literary competence is necessary to go beyond the surface meaning of the text. David Bleich from America is the founder of 'subjective criticism.' Bleich argues that meaning is not contained in the text. However, it is developed when the reader works in

collaboration with fellow readers and then achieves collective meaning of the text. Meaning of any text is determined through common negotiations among the group of readers. More recently, Steven Mailloux, American professor of English, developed the theory of rhetorical hermeneutics. It refers how certain interpretations are accepted by readers due to influences of institutional politics. American Feminist, Betty Tompkins offered a different perspective when she linked the act of reading with the context of gender. Judith Fetterley talks about the effects that reading texts can have on women. The reader-oriented criticism is still holding its influence in 21st century. With the advent of digital media, new strategies of reading are emerging. Everyone in digital communication gets a chance to consume and produce texts. The roles of writer and readers are rapidly interchanging. There is some confusion among students of literary theory about these two versions- reception theory and reader-response criticism. What are the key differences between reception theory and reader-response theory? The differences between reception theory and reader-response theory are not that vast. However, an attempt can be made to differentiate these two streams of reader-oriented theory. To begin with, reception theory is German whereas reader-response theory is exclusively American. Reception Theory flourished under the philosophical influences of Husserl and Heidegger. The origin of Reader-Response Criticism is in the theories developed by Louise Rosenblatt in the 1930s. Secondly, reception theory is more concerned with phenomenology and less with hermeneutics, i.e. it is more concerned with how we know the world rather than how we interpret the world. Whereas reader-response theory places more emphasis on how we interpret the world, i.e. the hermeneutic aspect. Reception theory is more about reception and perception of the world. Reader-response theory, on the other hand, is more about the activity of interpretation. Interpretation may not necessarily be based on the impressions, or perceptions that the reader has about the text. Certain contexts (social, ideological, etc.) can also be brought into consideration. Thus, interpretation is a combination of these two- the reader's perception plus the context together become the meaning of the text. Another important point of difference is that reception theory is more applicable to Communication Studies, Film Studies and other areas of performing arts and art, in general. Reader-response theory, however, is exclusively limited to the study of literary works. If we talk about the extension of reception theory, we need to mention Stuart Hall. Hall, as we know, is a renowned practitioner of Cultural Studies. However, he is also an important figure in the field of Communication Studies. The encoding-decoding model of communication (1973) was given by Hall. This model is nothing but the application of reception theory to the field of Communication Studies. Thus, reception theory

is relevant to Communication Studies, Film Studies and recent studies in globalization as well. By contrast, reader-response theory is relevant to literary texts alone. Coming towards the end, an enquiry can be made regarding how to use reader-response criticism in actual application, especially in research.

Essentially, reader-oriented criticism is a reaction against the new critical dictum which places importance on the literary text alone. It is primarily an investigation into the readers' participation in the act of literary interpretation. To sum it up, the term 'reader' in reader-response criticism did not refer to a trained individual but to a consciousness, a general awareness of linguistic and literary conventions and practices. Even though the role of the reader is enhanced by reader-response theory, it does not imply that the reader is autonomous, independent and the only source of meaning-making and interpretation. The reader, again, is not an individual but an institution, an interpretive community, the generalization, the codes, or the consciousness.

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