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From the OWL resource Literary Theory and Schools of Criticism

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Reader-Response Criticism (1960s-present)

What Do You Think?

At its most basic level, reader response criticism considers readers' reactions to literature as vital to interpreting the meaning of the text. However, reader-response criticism can take a number of different approaches. A critic deploying reader-response theory can use a psychoanalytic lens, a feminists lens, or even a structuralist lens. What these different lenses have in common when using a reader response approach is they maintain "...that what a text is cannot be separated from what it does" (Tyson 154).

Tyson explains that "...reader-response theorists share two beliefs: 1) that the role of the reader cannot be omitted from our understanding of literature and 2) that readers do not passively consume the meaning presented to them by an objective literary text; rather they actively make the meaning they find in literature" (154). In this way, reader-response theory shares common ground with some of the deconstructionists discussed in the Post-structural area when they talk about "the death of the author," or her displacement as the (author)itarian figure in the text.

Typical questions:

- How does the interaction of text and reader create meaning?
- What does a phrase-by-phrase analysis of a short literary text, or a key portion of a longer text, tell us about the reading experience prestructured by (built into) that text?
- Do the sounds/shapes of the words as they appear on the page or how they are spoken by the reader enhance or change the meaning of the word/work?

- How might we interpret a literary text to show that the reader's response is, or is analogous to, the topic of the story?
- What does the body of criticism published about a literary text suggest about the critics who interpreted that text and/or about the reading experience produced by that text? (Tyson 191)

Here is a list of scholars we encourage you to explore to further your understanding of this theory:

- Peter Rabinowitz - *Before Reading*, 1987
- Stanley Fish - *Is There a Text in This Class?-The Authority of Interpretive Communities*, 1980
- Elizabeth Freund - *The Return of the Reader: Reader-Response Criticism*, 1987
- David Bleich
- Norman Holland - *The Dynamics of Literary Response*, 1968
- Louise Rosenblatt
- Wolfgang Iser - *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett*, 1974
- Hans Rober Jauss

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