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**READER-RESPONSE THEORY**

This is an approach to literature that focus on the reader than the work itself, by attempting to describe what goes on in the reader’s mind during the reading of a text. Hence, the consciousness of the reader produced –by reading the work – is the actual subject of reader-response criticism. These readers are not after a ‘correct’ reading of the text or what the author presumably intended; instead, they are interested in the reader’s individual experience with the text. Thus, there is no single definitive reading of a work because readers create rather than discover absolute meanings in texts. However, this approach is not a rationale for mistaken or bizarre readings, this kind of strategy calls attention to how we read and what influences our readings and what that reveals about ourselves.

This theory is an umbrella term embracing various theories that share an emphasis on the reader’s construction of the meanings he or she finds in a text but differing in their explanations of the ways in which such construction necessarily does, or in some cases should, take place. All are explanations of what readers actually do, they are thus theories of interpretation and therefore have a place in Hermeneutics.

Reader-response theory focuses on the activity of reading a work of literature. Reader-response critics turn from the traditional conception of a work as an achieved structure of meanings to the responses of readers as they read a text. By this shift of perspective, a literary work is converted into an activity that goes on in a reader's mind; that is, a reader's experience and the text. It is through this interaction that meaning is made. Proponents of this school of criticism believe that literature has no objective meaning or existence; rather readers bring their own thoughts, moods and experiences to whatever text they are reading and get out of it whatever they happen to base on their own expectations and ideas. This unit introduces you to the origin, tenets and criticism levelled against reader-response theory.

**THE ORIGIN OF READER-RESPONSE THEORY**

As its name implies, reader-response criticism focuses on readers’ responses to literary texts. This attention to the reading process, according to Lois Tyson (2006), emerged during the 1930s as a reaction against the growing tendency to reject the reader’s role in creating meaning, a tendency that became a formal principle of the New Criticism which dominated critical practice in the 1940s and 1950s.

Reader-response theory did not receive much attention until the 1970s. This school maintains that what a text is cannot be separated from what it does. Reader-response theorists share two beliefs:

(1) That the role of the reader cannot be omitted from our understanding of literature.

(2) And, 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.

This second belief, that readers actively make meaning, suggests, of course, that different readers may read the same text quite differently. In fact, reader-response theorists believe that even the same reader reading the same text on two different occasions will probably produce different meanings because so many variables contribute to our experience of the text. The knowledge we have acquired between our first and second reading of a text, personal experiences that have occurred in the interim, a change in mood between our two encounters with the text, or a change in the purpose for which we are reading it can all contribute to our production of different meanings for the same text.

Reader-response theory is a school of criticism which maintains that readers actually contribute to the meaning of works of literature. Reader-response criticism studies the interaction of reader with the text. Reader-response critics hold that the text is incomplete until it is read. Each reader brings something to the text that completes it and that makes each reading different. For this school of thought, the literary text has no life of its own without the reader.

Although reader-response criticism borrows its methodology from New Criticism, Structuralism and Post-structuralism, it challenges their dominance and rejects their contention that the work must be studied in isolation from its context. Context—historical, biographical, cultural, psychoanalytic—is relevant to the understanding of the text. Reader-response theory further rejects the post-structuralist claim that texts are meaningless. Texts may be incomplete in themselves, but the reading of them makes them potentially reflective of the real world—or at least the reader's experience of the real world. Reader-response scholars, like the German critic, Wolfgang Iser, agrees with Jacques Derrida that works contain "gaps” which must be filled. Authors always leave something unsaid or unexplained and thus invite readers to fill the resulting spaces with their own imaginative constructs. Iser argues, therefore, that many equally valid interpretations of a work are possible. Interpretations of a work will vary from person to person and even from reading to reading.

Some groups of reader-response critics focus on how biographical and cultural contexts influence the interpretation of texts. These critics argue that reading is a collective enterprise. For instance the American critic Stanley Fish states that a reader's understanding of what "literature" is and what works of literature mean is formed by "interpretive communities" (groups to which readers belong). These groups could be small (a circle of friends) or large (a region or cultural entity). Fish rejects the idea that a text has a core of meaning that everyone in any age would accept. Rather, shared understandings of a text's meaning come from the beliefs of a community of readers, not from the text. Each reader's preconceptions actually "create" the text. If, for example, a reader believes that a miscellaneous collection of words is a religious poem, the reader will perceive it as a religious poem. If a reader believes that the work fits a particular theory, the reader will find facts in the work to support that theory. The theory, in a sense, "creates" the facts.

**Criticisms against Reader-Response Theory**

Reader-response criticism sees the reader as essential to the interpretation of a work. Each reader is unique, with different educations, experiences, moral values, opinions, and tastes, etc. Therefore, each reader’s interaction with a work is unique. A reader-response critic analyses the features of the text that shape and guide a reader’s reading. The critic emphasizes recursive reading—re-reading for new interpretations. For reader-response critics, each generation has different experiences, values, and issues; hence, each generation will read a work differently. However, reader-response theory has been criticised as being overly impressionistic and guilty of the affective fallacy (too focused on the emotional effect of the work). Other critics have plainly said that it is not intellectual. These attacks have led to the adaptation of another version of reader-response criticism called reception theory.

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