

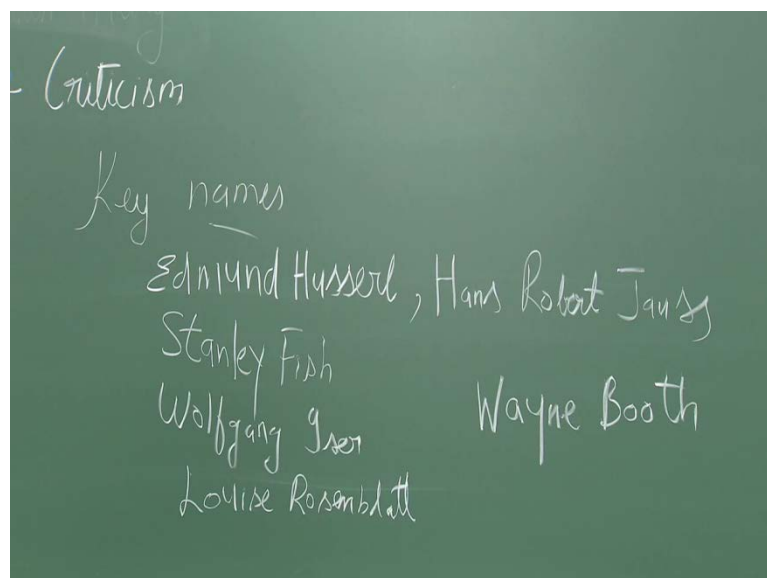
Literary Theory and Literary Criticism
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Lecture - 19
Reader Response Criticism

Good morning, today's topic is Reader Response Criticism. This is the approach or theory which we came to prominence in the 60's. This is connected to post structuralisms emphasis and the reader's role in actively constructing a text rather than passively consuming them. So, in other words who is the key person here, the reader as the name itself suggests it, the focus is on readers. Reader response criticism believes that a text has no meaning before a reader experiences it or reads it.

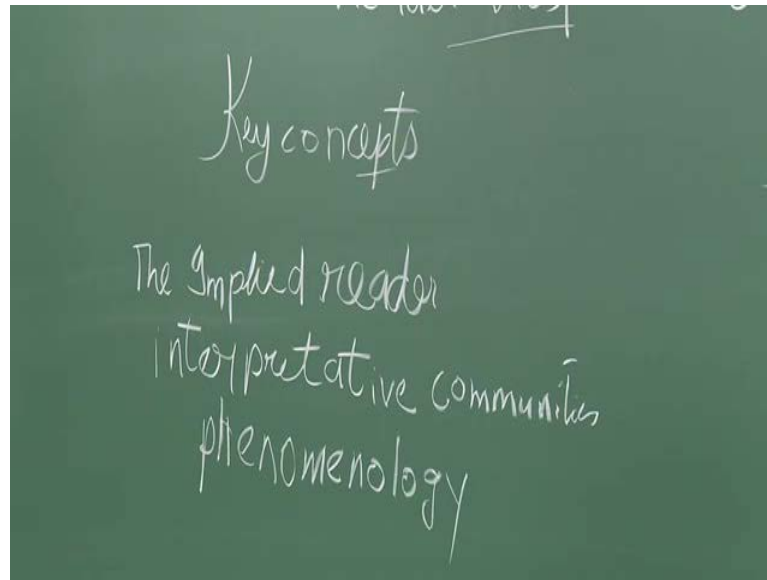
Here the critic examines the ways in which different readers or using other academic jargon interpretative communities, they make meaning out of both personal reactions and inherited ways of reading that. The concept is that, every reader brings along someone his own or her own attitudes beliefs and practices and this is the way they interpret a text, it could be a film or a work of art or a literary text. And we all have our own pre conceived notions and knowledge and attitudes and believes, that shape our understanding and our interpretation of the text.

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So, again to repeat both personal reactions and inherited ways of reading, these are the things that influence the way we read a text. One of the foremost theorists of the reception theory was Edmund Husserl, a German philosopher and the critic and he gave us the doctrine of phenomenology.

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You can look at the key word here phenomenology and we owe this word to the theories of Edmund Husserl. The foundations of this were laid by Husserl, who lived from 1859 to 1938 and he was a German philosopher and critic ((Refer Time: 02:47)), the word phenomenon means appearance. So, Edmund Husserl was as a philosophical concept, phenomenology shifts our emphasis of a study away from the external world of objects.

Husserl points out the complexity of the term phenomenon, where we perceive an object and when we perceive an object, it appears to us in different ways and there are several ways of looking at an object. The idea is, that there are several ways of looking at an object and here we can apply it to the text that we look at. Another key theorist of reception theory is ((Refer Time: 03:37)) Hans Robert Jauss, he too was a German critic and a philosopher, here one of his important texts was literary history as a challenge to literary theory, a lengthy name, literary history as a challenge to literary theory. Here he argues that the history of a works reception by readers played an integral role in the works aesthetic status and significance.

So, again the focus is shifted on the readers that reception by readers plays an integral role in the works aesthetic status significance and it is reception. Reader response criticism encompasses various approaches to literature that explore and seek to explain the diversity and sometimes even divergence of readers responses to literary works. Now, on Louise Rosenblatt ((Refer Time: 04:35)) is often credited with pioneering the approaches in her book, *Literature as Exploration* published in 1938.

In her 1969 essay *towards A Transactional Theory of Reading*, she summed up her position as a poem is, what the reader lifts through under the guidance of the text and experiences as relevant to the text. She continues, the idea that a poem presupposes a reader actively involved with a text is particularly shocking to those seeking to emphasize the objectivity of their interpretations. Now, we have been talking about formalism, the formalist and what did they talk about and the focus was on form and the way a poem or a work of literature was formed.

So, they spoke of the poem itself, if you would recall that formalists emphasized on discussing the text or the poem itself as the concrete work of art. If they have no interest in what a work of literature makes a reader live through. In the verbal icon, which is a 1954 book by William k Wimsatt and Monroe c Beardsley, they use the term affective fallacy which we have already discussed, when we were talking about formalism and new criticism.

And this is used to define an as ironist, the very idea that readers response is relevant to the meaning of a literary work, so this is the background. And now, we come to one of the foremost exponents of reader response criticism ((Refer Time: 06:36)), Stanley Fish. So, remember we have been talking Edmund Husserl and Hans Robert Jauss, as well as Louise Rosenblatt who have been talking about it. It is important to look at an object or a text in a variety of ways.

Now, Stanley Fish whose early work is seen by many people as making the or marking the true beginning of contemporary reader response criticism, also took issues with the tenets of formalism. In his work, *Literature in the Reader Effective Stylistics* published in 1970, he suggest that literature exist and signifies when it is read and Fish suggest and it is force is an affective one. So, what he suggest is that, literature exist and signifies when it is read and it is force is an affective one.

Furthermore, reading is a temporal processes not a special one. As formalist assume, when they step back and survey the literary work, as if it were an object spread out before them. Coming back to Stanley Fish, in his book and this is his seminal text called *Is There a Text in This Class*. So, Fish argues that what constraints interpretation is not fixed meanings in a linguistic system that gives determinacy to the meaning of an utterance, but rather the context of the utterance.

Fish's overall explanation of text and textuality offers a balanced counter to the formalist, who claim that the text is an object in it is own right and that it somehow posses stable meaning independently of any reader. So, what is the key idea here, that where they differ, where the proponents of reader response criticism differ from the proponents of formalism is, in formalism we are encouraged to look at the text in itself.

You remember the terms autonomy of the text, the formalist do not give too much of emphasis or significance to the readers whereas, in reader response criticism the shift, the emphasis shifts on the reader and they go contrary to the formalist claim that the text is an object in it is own right and that, it possesses a stable meaning independently of any reader. Wolfgang Iser German critic he has described that process in the implied reader, his seminal work the implied reader.

Patterns of communication in prose fiction from Bunyan to Beckett and this was written in 1974, another book is *The Act of Reading a Theory of Aesthetic Response* which was published in 1976. In his works, Iser argues that text contain gaps or blanks, that powerfully affect the reader who must explain them, connect what they separate and create in his or her mind, aspects of a work that are not in the text, but are incited by the text.

These are only hinted by the text; however, they are missing and this is something that you will find in a very popular and critically acclaimed text like *The English Patient* by Michael Ondaatje, where there are too many gaps or blanks is left to the reader's imagination to fill in those gaps and blanks. So, these are the kinds of texts where you can supply or whether the reader can supply his own information which comes from his own knowledge, previous knowledge and attitudes and understanding literature and also his worldview.

So, a reader has the capacity to provide meanings to those blanks which are not stated very explicitly in the text, but are only hinted at. With the redefinition of literature as something that only exists meaningful in the mind of the reader and with the redefinition of the literary work as a catalyst of mental events, comes a redefinition of the reader. So, now, reader becomes supreme, you may also recall this famous essay by Roland Barthe Death of the Author which we will talk about very soon.

No longer is the reader, the passive recipient of those ideas that an author has planted in a text, the reader is active and this is the major principle of reader response criticism. People like Rosenblatt and Wolfgang Iser, they insist that the reader is active and not passive and he or she have the ability to interpret or analyze or understand the text, according to his or her own worldview. Fish also makes the point, same point or similar point in literature in the reader and where he famously states, reading is something you do.

And it is a loaded phrase, that reading is something you do, because reading is not just something that is imposed on you. But, it is something that you actively choose to do it, it is a very participatory kind of an act. Now, Iser in focusing critical interest on the gaps in texts, on the blanks that readers have to fill in, similarly redefines the reader as an active maker of meaning, other reader response critics define the reader differently.

((Refer Time: 13:41)) Now, there is a critic called Wayne Booth w a y n e b o o t h, Wayne Booth uses the phrase, the implied reader to mean the reader created by the work. Iser also uses the term the implied reader, but substitutes the educated reader for what Fish calls the intended reader. Whatever way the importance of reader had never been so prominent, so the implied reader, the intended reader, the educated reader call it whatever, but the reader becomes supreme.

Since, the mid 1970's reader response criticism has evolved into a variety of new forms, now we have subjectivists like David Blende, Norman Holland and Robert Crossman and they have viewed the readers response, not as one guided by the text, but rather as one motivated by deep seated personal psychological needs. In other words, a reader is not just following the path that the writer chooses for him. He also creates his own path and he is motivated by the deep seated and psychological needs which stem from within.

Now, reader response criticism focuses on the reader and how he or she receives the literary work, so this is the major feature that we should remember. Critical approaches to literature that stress, the validity of reader response to a text theorizing that each interpretation is valid in the context from which a reader approaches a text. So, this kind of a need and response criticism, it arose as a critical theory in response to formalist interpretations of literature.

Unlike the letter which stresses the primacy of the text and an objective interpretation of it. We have been talking about how objective and this was the major criticism leveled against new criticism and formalism, that they are two objective and they are two scientific way of understanding a text. So, unlike formalism which stresses the primacy of the text and an objective interpretation of it, based on establish criteria.

Advocates of reader response criticism focused on the importance of their reader and their individual subjective response to the text. One of the earliest proponents of this theory as we have already talked about was Louis Rosenblatt, who stated that a poem is what the reader lives through under the guidance of the texts and experiences as well even to the texts. The significance Rosenblatt and other reader response critics placed on the reader was in direct opposition to the position taken by formalist critics in the past.

We have already seen, how formalists viewed the texts as the primary focus, as an object of primary focus and it is impact on the reader or the idea that readers response, was in any way relevant in the interpretation of the work was inconceivable for the formalist. So, they found it hard to believe, that a reader can be participatory in giving meaning, making meaning for the texts. So, look at the text itself, this is what the principle feature of formalism was and we have to remember that, how reader response theory or criticism goes against it, how it is counterpoise to it.

Apart from Rosenblatt, other influential reader response critics we have already seen, they are Stanley Fish and Wolfgang Iser and both argued against regarding literary works as mere objects. All of them were unanimous in their rejection of the affective fallacy theory proposed by Wimsatt and Beardsley. Now, just to recall in their essay Wimsatt and Beardsley stated, their miss giving's about what they term as obstacles to objective criticism and the dangers of intentional fallacy, defined it is confusion between the text and it is origins.

And affective fallacy explained as the distinction that should be made between what a text is and what it does. During the late 1970's and 80's, reader response criticism influenced in part by trends in other disciplines, especially psychology and psychoanalytical theories, expanded to include a study of the reader as subject, a combination of various social practices, defined and positioned socially by his or her environment.

Recent works by critics including Norman Holland, these have also expanded the focus of reader response theory and this is a departure from the earlier held position, which emphasize the primacy of the relationship between reader and text regardless of the environment in which a text functions ((Refer Time: 19:40)). Now, Fish he has laid out in his theories regarding interpretive strategies, which are shared by interpretive communities in several essays which he wrote during the 1980's and subsequently.

So, the idea is in reader response criticism that the act of reading is like a dialogue between the reader and the text that has meaning only when the two are joined in conversation. So, there has to be an actively, an active participation and active dialogue between the reader and the texts. The entire idea redefines the role of the texts from an independent object into something that can only exist, when it is read and interacts with the mind of the reader.

In this way the reader is not a passive recipient of what the text says, but rather takes an active role in interpreting it, so therefore, the concept of interpretative communities. Now, this form of criticism even goes so far as to examine the role that individual words and phrases in the text play when interacting with the reader. The sounds and shapes that words make or even how they are pronounced or spoken by the reader can essentially alter the meaning of the text and this is a key feature of reader response criticism, that readers interpret every single sound and word in their own unique ways.

And all these things can alter the meaning of the text which was not a thought of earlier. So, what are the theoretical assumptions now? That literature exists only when it is read, meaning is an event, that literary text possess no fixed and final meaning or value, there is no one correct meaning. Literary meaning and values are transactional and dialogic, there is always a dialogue happening, there all there is always a transaction or exchange happening between who, between the readers and the texts.

And these transactions are happening between the reader and the texts, these dialogues were created by the interaction of the reader with the texts. So, going back to Wolfgang Iser, he argues that the text in part controls the readers responses, but contains gaps that the reader creatively fills. There is always a tension between the implied reader, who is established by the response inviting structures of the texts and this type of reader is assumed and created by the work itself.

And the actual reader, who brings his own experiences and preconceived notions to the text, so the implied reader and the actual reader, there is always a tension between the two entities. Reader response criticisms starts with what formalist literary criticism called the affective fallacy ((Refer Time: 23:11)), that the response of the reader is relevant to understanding a text and uses it focus of approaching a work of literature.

There are different approaches within this school of critical theory; however, some look at the work from the individual readers points of view, while others focus on how groups or communities view the text. So, you see there is a difference between how an individual reader would read a text and how communities or groups would view a text. For these schools of criticism, it is what the text does to the reader that is important and not necessarily, the work itself the author's intent or the social political or cultural context in which it was written.

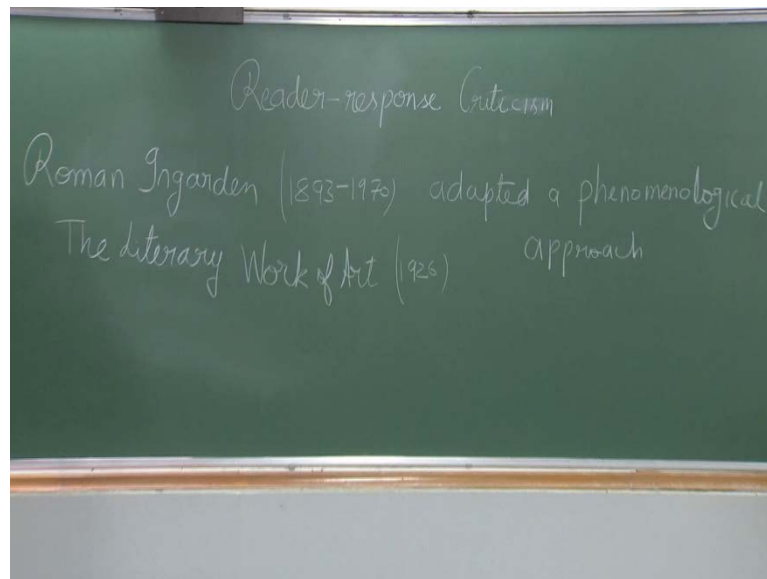
The implied reader was an idea introduced by Wolfgang Iser and this is the reader, who is required for the text, the reader who the author imagines when writing and who he or she is writing for. So, this reader is guided by the text which contains gaps meant for the reader to fill explaining and making connections within the texts. The reader ultimately creates meaning based not only what is in the text, but what the text has provoked inside him or her.

And Stanley Fish introduces the term the informed reader, who brings prior shared knowledge to the experience of reading. So, different kinds of readers, but the same idea that it is, the reader who makes meaning of a texts, there is also a concept of social reader response and social reader response criticism focuses on interpretive communities, groups that has shared beliefs and values and how these groups use particular strategies ((Refer Time: 25:07)) that affect both the text and their reading behaviors.

It is the group that then determines what an acceptable interpretation of the text is, with the meaning being whatever the group says that it is. For example, a book club or a group of college students, based on their own cultural and group beliefs will generally agree on the ultimate meaning on a text. Right now, what we are witnessing is a very popular work like the Harry Potter series and there are all kinds of blogs and social networking sites, which interpret the work or the text in their own unique ways.

So, individually we can find our own personal meaning in the story of Harry Potter and there are also groups and communities of devoted followers, who provide their own meaning to the text.

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Roman Ingarden is one of the most influential critics of this theory, Ingarden adapted a phenomenological approach to explain, how we respond to a work of art. He was a Polish theorist and most of his works have been translated in the English language. One of his seminal works is the literary work of art published in 1926, where he tells us the feature of a literary work and what parts it must have and how they are interrelated.

He also describes, how literary work relates to other entities such as authors, copies of texts, readers and ideal meanings. So, it is not just a work by itself, but how various parts are interrelated and various part from different texts as well as various authors and also copies of texts. So, every copy of a text also differs and how there could be patterns of

interrelatedness in them and all these constitute a meaning for the reader. So, all this come under reader response criticism according to.

For Ingarden, a literary work originates in the intentional acts of consciousness of it is author, these acts and this is an important term in Ingarden acts. These acts make it possible for a reader to re experience the work in his or her own consciousness, every reader experience these acts of reading and which is a very intentional act and it is an act of consciousness. So, in a conscious act of reading and every reader has his or her own approach towards the texts.

Again, according to Ingarden the text contains many elements that are places of indeterminacy. So, this is another important term that you should know, indeterminacy and an active reading responds to the sequence of the printed words and fills out. This is very interesting, please pay attention to this fact, that a reader who is active, he consciously or she consciously fills out these indeterminate aspects of the texts.

Suppose you read a text and there is a sense of deliberate indeterminacy, you as a reader are supposed to fill out these gaps and these indeterminacy. So, a reader brings along his own consciousness, how he or she responds, so all these are terms associated with Roman Ingarden. So, the reader by filling in these gaps and indeterminacies, he concretizes the schematic literary work. So, there is a literary work is a schema and a reader through his or her acts of consciousness, concretizes the literary work, such a reading is also termed as co creative with the conscious processes recorded by the author.

For the reader it constitutes a cozy reality not complete reality, but a cozy reality which is it is own fictional world. So, reader creates his or her own cozy real fictional world by filling out those gaps and indeterminacies, so that is the idea of Roman Ingarden and his approach to reading a text, now limitation of reader response criticism. So, it is often argued that reader response criticism allows for any interpretation of a text to be considered valid and it can devalue the content of the text as a result.


You know sometimes people may go, haywire with their interpretation of a text; they may go totally of the mark. So, that would be a very dangerous way of interpreting a texts and that is a serious limitation. People also argues, scholars also argue that the text is being ignored completely or that it is impossible to properly interpret a text without taking into consideration, the culture or era in which it is written.

Another major complaint against reader response criticism is that these theories do not allow for the readers knowledge and experiences to be expanded by the text at all. In spite of it is few pitfalls or drawbacks, reader response criticism remains very popular, very fashionable among critics and students of literature and some of the questions and concerns, it raises is that how does the interaction of text and reader create meaning.

So, this is something that we all look into, that how are meanings created when there is an interaction between text and reader. Do the sounds and 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 text. Also, how might we interpret a literary text to show that the reader's response is or is analogous to the topic of the story? So, these are the major questions that as a student's of literature, we should be concerned with while looking at reader response criticism.

So, to sum up these are the key concepts ((Refer Time: 32:54)) the implied reader interpretative communities, phenomenology and the key idea is reader is supreme in reader response criticism, as opposed to the autonomy of the texts as suggested by the formalist. ((Refer Time: 33:14)) These are the key names Edmund Husserl, Hans Robert Jauss, Wayne booth, Stanley fish, Wolfgang Iser and Louise Rosenblatt.

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- <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ingarden/>
 - http://bcs.bedfordstmartins.com/virtualit/poetry/critical_define/crit_reader.html
 - <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/722/06/>
 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=weRaC-Xjvhl>

So, here is a link to some important references, some very useful links, please make a note of these. You may notice that there is also a Youtube link, which is a link to

Professor Linda Hachin talking about reader response criticism. I do hope that you find time to look at these links.

Thank you very much and see you in the next class.