Reader-Response Theory

EH 4301
Spring 2006
Attention to reading process emerged during 1930s as a reaction against the growing tendency to reject the reader’s role in creating meaning.

- Principles of New Criticism that dominated.
  - Timeless meaning of text
  - “Text and text alone”
Focuses on readers’ responses to literary texts.

Leading proponents:
- Stanley Fish
- Wayne Booth
- Louise Rosenblatt
Louise Rosenblatt’s *Literature as Exploration* (1938)
- NC was at its height with Fugitives
- RR didn’t receive much attention until 1970s
2 basic beliefs of RR:

- The role of the reader cannot be omitted from our understanding of literature.
- 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.
2 contrasting emphases:
- the means by which the text controls the reader.
- the way in which the reader creates or recreates the text.
Main advocates acknowledge complementary importance of
  Text and reader
  Text’s relationship with reader
Reader is necessary third party in the relationship that constitutes the literary work.
Reality is to be found not in the external world itself, but rather in the mental perception of externals.
Work is not fully created until the readers:
- assimilate it
- actualize it

In light of their own knowledge and experience.

Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?*
Text guides the reader.

Rosenblatt, *The Reader, the Text, and the Poem*

**READER + TEXT = MEANING**
Reading as a process.
Method which continually questions what happens in the reader’s mind during the process.
Types of Responses

- Initial emotional response
- Interpretive
- Analysis
- Questions
- Summary
- Arguing with author (believability of text)
- Intertextuality
- Rethinking one part of text after reading another.
Reader Response

Method involves an analysis of the developing responses of the reader in relation to the words as they succeed one another in time.
Stressing response rather than interpretation, question is raised:

Do texts, by themselves, have objective identity?
Questions

- What does this work mean to me, in my present intellectual & moral makeup?
- What particular aspects of my life may help me understand and appreciate the work?
- How can the work improve my understanding and widen my insights?
- How can my increasing understanding help me understand the work more deeply?
Each individual reads literary work for himself/herself
- Draws on past experiences
- Molds new experiences from new text
Imaginative literature is something to be lived through by reader.

EXPERIENCE LITERATURE

Personal experience with literature
  “Participate” in literature.
Even same reader reading same text on two different occasions will probably produce different meanings because of so many variables contributing to our experience of text.

Why second reading of text produces greater insights.
Knowledge acquired between first and second reading of text,
personal experiences that have occurred,
change in mood between two encounters
Change in purpose
Teachers can help students learn to perform in response to text.

Likens teacher to voice teacher or swim coach.
Transactional Reader-Response

- Louise Rosenblatt formulated many of premises
- Analyzes transaction between reader and text
- Both are necessary in the production of meaning
text

Transaction

reader
As we read text, it acts as a stimulus to which we respond in our own personal way.

Feelings, associations, memories, etc., occur as we read.

These responses influence the way in which we make sense of the text as we move through it.
- Literature encountered prior to this reading
- Sum total of accumulated knowledge
- Current physical condition (mood)
In order for transaction to occur
  Approach to text must be
    Aesthetic rather than efferent
Efferent
- Reading for information
  - Telephone book
  - History text

Aesthetic
- Reading for pleasure
- Emotional focus
  - Literature
According to Iser...

- 2 kinds of meaning every text offers:
  - Determinate
    - Facts of text
      - Certain events in plot or physical descriptions clearly provided by words on page.
  - Indeterminate
    - “gaps” in text such as actions that are not clearly explained or have multiple explanations
      - Allow and invite reader to create own interpretations
Text acts as blueprint

- Corrects our mis-interpretations when we go back and re-read
- Acts as guide to self-correct
text

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"event"

reader
Fish’s example from *Is There a Text in This Class?*

That Judas perished by hanging himself, there is no certainty in Scripture: though in one place it seems to affirm it, and by a doubtful word hath given occasion to translate it; yet in another place, in a more punctual description, it maketh it improbable, and seems to overthrow it. (71)
That Judas perished by hanging himself, is an example for us all.

That Judas perished by hanging himself, shows how conscious he was of the enormity of his sins.

That Judas perished by hanging himself, should give us pause.
That Judas perished by hanging himself, there is no... doubt

That Judas perished by hanging himself, there is no certainty
That Judas perished by hanging himself, there is no certainty in Scripture: though in one place it seems to affirm it, and by a doubtful word hath given occasion to translate it; yet in another place, in a more punctual description, it maketh it improbable, and seems to overthrow it. (71)