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Reader-Response Approach: Critical Concepts and Methodology in Phenomenological Reading Theory

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Abstract

Background: Reader-oriented approach met its climax in cultural and literary theory in the late ۱۹۷۰s. Its origins could be traced back to the early ۱۹۳۰s when attention to the reading process emerged as a reaction against the rejection of the reader's role in creating meaning. From a philosophical view, reader-oriented criticism has its roots in Edmund Husserl's phenomenology and Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics. As with Husserl's 'bracketing' of the real object, the actual historical context of the text, its author, conditions of production and readership are ignored; however, phenomenological criticism aims at a wholly 'immanent' reading of the text, thoroughly unaffected by anything outside it.

Purpose: The present study, while demonstrating the critical concepts and methodology of the reception theory, seeks to shed light on the significant role played by the reader in the corresponding approaches.

Method: The present study compatibly provides a close analysis which consists of selection and discussion of theoretical and descriptive material as well as a detailed comparison of theories in terms of their applicability. The research method of the present paper is thus library-based and categorized as theoretical study; correspondingly, the present paper will be entirely literature-based in that, in the academic library research, the conclusions are based on the analysis of data of a particular area.

Findings: Louise M. Rosenblatt's categorization of Efferent and Aesthetic Readings, and her concepts of Determinate and Indeterminate Meanings proved to be of central significance to the reader-oriented approach. Similarly, Hans Robert Juass's 'Horizons of Expectation' and his idea concerning three ways of reaction to the texts including Negation, Assimilation, and Creation, together with Wolfgang Iser's dichotomy of the Implied and Actual Reader and his innovative concepts of Concretization and Gaps played a highly influential role in the development of this approach. Moreover, attention should be paid to major contemporary figures including Stanley Fish and his notion of Affective Stylistics and Interpretive Community, Norman Holland and the idea of threefold stages of reading

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including Defense-Fantasy-Transformation, David Bleich and his definition of Experience-Oriented Interpretations, and Gerald Prince with his concept of triplet Real-Virtual-Ideal Readers.

Results: Reader-response theory could be categorized into several modes including:
۱) "Transactional" approach used by Louise Rosenblatt and Wolfgang Iser

۲) "Historical context" favored by Hans Robert Juass

۳) "Affective stylistics" presented by Stanley Fish

۴) "Psychological" approach employed by Norman Holland

۵) "Subjective" approach in the work of David Bleich

۶) "Social" approach in the mature works of Stanley Fish

۷) "Textual" approach in the work of Gerald Prince

Implications: The mechanism of the process of reading could be more elaborated if explored in terms of the main concepts of the approaches of the reception theory.

Originality: The present study emphasizes the role played by the "reader" in the reading process and the significance of the reader in the construction of meaning, which has been argued for in all the approached investigated.

Keywords: Reader-response approach; phenomenology; interpretation; reading; text; implied reader; actual reader

۱.۱ Introduction

Reader-response criticism, one of the major critical schools in contemporary cultural and literary studies, has provided an extensively significant approach to reading the texts. Frequently referred to as the criticism of the consciousness, it found its origin in the phenomenological method of the well-known twentieth-century philosopher, Edmund Husserl. Correspondingly, it was also amended by the practice of hermeneutics in Hans-Georg Gadamer's framework of thought.

Reader-oriented approaches rose to prominence in the late ۱۹۷۰s and early ۱۹۸۰s. Major theoretical evaluations by the American transactional reader-response critic, Louise M. Rosenblatt, developed this approach to a great extent. Furthermore, the works of the critics of the Constance school, including Hans Robert Juass and Wolfgang Iser, played a considerably effective role in the development of this mode of criticism. Reader-response approach to reading the texts was thus equipped with a new tool box which consisted of highly specialized

terminology such as Horizons of Expectation, Negation, Assimilation, Creation, the Implied/Actual Reader dichotomy, Concretization, and Gaps. Reader-response criticism has been continually explored in the past decades in terms of the new theoretical frameworks of recent figures.

The present study seeks to demonstrate the critical concepts and methodology of the practitioners of reception theory including the older generation of critics mentioned above and recent figures like Stanley Fish, Norman Holland, David Bleich, and Gerald Prince. First, the philosophical background of the approach such as phenomenology and hermeneutics will be briefly introduced. Then, Literature Review of the study is presented in which light is shed on the major novel sources available to the common researcher. Finally, attempt is made to fully investigate the main concepts and methodology of the process of reading as represented in the works of major proponents of this critical approach. Finally, the concluding remark of the study is presented in which the significance of the reader in the construction of meaning in the reading process had been fully highlighted.

۱.۲ Philosophical Background: Phenomenology and Hermeneutics

۱.۲.۱ Edmund Husserl

In *The Idea of Phenomenology*, Husserl delineates phenomenology as "the science of cognition" or "the science of the essence of consciousness." (۱۹۶۴: ۲). According to Husserl, phenomenology is "the study of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view." (Smith, ۲۰۰۷: ۱۸۸). He argues that objects could be regarded as things which are "intended" by consciousness. All consciousness is consciousness of something: In thinking, I am aware that my thought is pointing towards some object. The act of thinking and the object of thought are internally related.

Husserl's main phenomenological method is 'bracketing.' We should put in brackets, anything which is beyond our immediate experience; we should reduce the external world to the contents of our consciousness. This is what 'phenomenological reduction' points to; therefore, everything not 'immanent' to consciousness must be excluded; all realities must be treated as pure 'phenomena' in terms of their appearances in our mind. 'Being' and 'meaning' are always bound up with one another. There is no object without a subject, and no subject without an object.

Phenomenological criticism is an attempt to apply the phenomenological method to the reading of literary works. As with Husserl's 'bracketing' of the real object, the actual historical context of the literary work, its author, conditions of production and readership are ignored; phenomenological criticism aims instead at a wholly 'immanent' reading of the text, totally unaffected by anything outside it.

Husserl's phenomenology thus focuses on the central role of the perceiver in creating meaning.

۱.۲.۲ Martin Heidegger

The German philosopher Martin Heidegger argued that being meant being-in-the-world. We are human subjects only because we are bound up with others and the material world, and these relations are constitutive of our life. The world is not an object 'out there' to be rationally analyzed. It is never something we can get outside of it. We emerge as subjects from inside a reality which we can never fully objectify, which encompasses both the 'subject' and 'object.'

Heidegger described his philosophical enterprise as a 'hermeneutic of Being.' The word 'hermeneutic' means the science or art of interpretation. Hermeneutics was originally referred to the interpretation of sacred scripture, but during the nineteenth century it broadened its scope to encompass the problem of textual interpretation as a whole.

۱.۲.۳ Hans-Georg Gadamer

It was Gadamer who applied Heidegger's situational approach to literary theory in order to arrive at a new definition of reading. For Gadamer, the meaning of a literary work is never exhausted by the intentions of its author; as the work passes from one cultural or historical context to another, new meanings may be emerged and they were never anticipated by its author or contemporary audience.

All interpretation is situational, shaped and constrained by the historically relative criteria of a particular culture. For Gadamer, all interpretation of a past work consists in a dialog between past and present. The present is only understandable through the past, with which it forms a living continuity; and the past is always grasped from our own partial viewpoint within the present. The event of understanding comes about when our own 'horizon' of historical meanings and assumptions fuses with the horizon within which the work itself is placed. History for Gadamer is a 'continuing chain.' He perceives history as a living dialog between past, present and future.

The most recent development of hermeneutics is known as 'reception aesthetics' or 'reception theory.' Reception theory focuses on the reader's role in literature and the process of reading which is always a dynamic one. There are a wide range of theorists who are considered as reader-oriented critics.

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۱.٤ Reader-Response Approach: Critical Concepts and Methodology

۱.٤.۱ Reading and Meaning in Rosenblatt's Theory

A Transactional reader-response critic, Louise M. Rosenblatt asserts that both the reader and the text must work together to produce meaning. They participate in or share a transactional experience. The text acts as a stimulus for eliciting various past experiences, thoughts and ideas from the reader, those found in both our everyday experience and in past reading experiences. Readers bring their individual personalities, their memories of the past events, their present concerns,

their particular physical condition, and all of their personhood to the reading of the text.

However, at the same time, the text shapes the reader's experiences by functioning as a blueprint, selecting, limiting, and ordering those ideas that best conform to the text. Through this transactional experience, the reader and the text produce a new creation, which she calls, a poem.

In *The Reader, The Text, The Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work*, Rosenblatt argues, "the poem, then, must be thought of as an event in time. It is not an object or an ideal entity. It happens during the coming-together, as compenetration of a reader and a text." (۱۹۷۸: ۱۲) A poem is defined as the result of an event that takes place during the reading process, or what she calls "aesthetic transaction." A poem is created each time a reader transacts with a text.

Rosenblatt argues that there are two major subdivisions of reading: When we read for information, we are engaging in efferent reading. On the other hand, we engage in aesthetic reading when we experience the text. We experience a personal relationship to the text that focuses our attention on the emotional subtleties of its language and encourages us to make judgments. We note every word, sounds, and patterns. We focus on the transactional experience of creating the poem. When we read aesthetically, we involve ourselves in a give-and-take encounter with the text. In the reading process, a reader may shift back and forth along a continuum between an efferent and an aesthetic mode of reading.

Meaning itself is of two major kinds for Rosenblatt: Determinate Meaning, which refers to what might be called the facts of the text, certain events in the plot or physical descriptions clearly provided by the words on the page; and Indeterminate Meaning, or indeterminacy, which refers to 'gaps' in the text – such as actions that are not clearly explained or that seem to have multiple explanations – which allow or invite the readers to create their own interpretations. Her efferent approach depends on determinate meaning while her aesthetic approach depends on both determinate and indeterminate meaning.

۱.٤.۲ Juass and the Reader's Reaction to the Text

Hans Robert Jauss, an important German exponent of 'reception theory,' gave a historical dimension to reader-oriented criticism. In his *Toward an Aesthetic Reception*, Jauss delineates that "a literary work is not an object that stands by itself and that offers the same view to each reader in each period. It is not a monument that monologically reveals its timeless essence." (۱۹۸۲: ۲۱) He further emphasizes that a text's social history must be considered when interpreting the text. Also, Jauss uses the term 'horizons of expectation' to describe the criteria readers use to judge literary texts in any given period.

He argues that because each historical period establishes its own horizons of expectation, the meaning of the text can never become fixed or universal. Readers

from any given historical period establish for themselves what they value in a text. Thus, a text does not have only one correct interpretation because its meaning changes from one historical context to another.

In his idea, the readers react to the text in different ways: **Negation** happens when there are a lot of norm-breaking aspects in the text, the (public) readers reject it. **Assimilation** is when some readers try to cope with the text, try to understand it, to routinize the aesthetic values. **Creation,** the most valuable reaction, happens when the readers become the creators of meaning, when they appreciate the norm-breaking aspects and begin to analyze it. Jauss thus is directly engaged with the concept of Aesthetic Distance, which is the distance between the reader and the text. According to him, "this distance is greatest when a work of art radically negates the established values and norms of the public." (Zima, ۱۹۹۹: ۶۲)

۱.٤.۳ The Reading Process and Wolfgang Iser

The German phenomenologist, a leading exponent of German reception theory, and a member of the so-called 'Constance School,' Iser was directly influenced by Roman Ingarden. He addressed two different types of the implied and actual readers. The implied reader embodies all those predispositions necessary for a literary work to exercise its effects. He/she has his/her roots firmly planted in the structure of the text./ is the reader implied by the text. The implied reader is the reader whom the text creates for itself and amounts to 'a network of response-inviting structures' which predispose us to read in certain ways. The implied reader is redefined as a textual element that is as the ideal reader whom a given textual structure requires. The implied reader is the well-informed reader who is able to realize the semantic, narrative, and pragmatic potential of the text.

On the other hand, the Actual Reader is the person who physically picks up the text and reads it. He/she comes to the text shaped by particular cultural and personal norms and prejudices. The experience of reader is affected by his/her past experience. The 'actual reader' receives certain mental images in the process of reading; however, the images will inevitably be colored by the reader's 'existing stock of experience'.

Other key terms in Iser's theory include the following: **Concretization**, which points to the process when a text is concretized; that is when the text registers in the reader's consciousness. At this moment the reader automatically views the text from his/her personal worldview. **Gaps**, or indeterminacies, which arefound in the texts; since the texts do not tell the reader everything that needs to be known about textual elements, readers must automatically fill in these gaps, using their own knowledge base. Literary texts are full of unexpected twists and turns, frustration of expectations, omission, and interruption of the flow. Therefore, whenever the flow is interrupted and we are led off in unexpected directions, the opportunity is given to us to bring into play our own faculty for establishing connections — for

filling in the gaps left by the text itself. Each individual reader will fill in the gaps in his own way. **Horizons of Expectation**, which are expectations about what will, may, or should happen next. Each reader creates his/her own horizons of expectation. These horizons of expectation change frequently because at the center of all stories is conflict or dramatic tension.

Iser focused on the concepts of Anticipation and Retrospection in his approach to the analysis of the act of reading. Iser, in "The Reading Process: a Phenomenological Approach" argued that "the world presented by literary texts is constructed out of what Ingarden has called intentional sentence correlatives;" accordingly, "each intentional sentence correlative opens up a particular horizon, which is modified . . . by succeeding sentences. While these expectations arouse interest in what is to come, the subsequent modification of them will also have a retrospective effect on what has already been read." (٢٠٠٠: ١٩١,١٩٢) According to Iser, the reader, "in establishing these interrelations between past, present and future, actually causes the text to reveal its potential multiplicity of connections. These connections are the product of the reader's mind working on the raw material of the text." (٢٠٠٠: ١٩٢)

Iser elucidates that "the fact that completely different readers can be differently affected by the 'reality' of a particular text is ample evidence of the degree to which literary texts transform reading into a creative process that is far above mere perception of what is written. The literary text activates our own faculties, enabling us to recreate the world it presents. The product of this creative activity is what we might call the virtual dimension of the text, which endows it with its reality. This virtual dimension is not the text itself, nor is it the imagination of the reader: it is the coming together of text and imagination." (ibid)

Moreover, Iser employed a triplet set of terms in his exploration of the reading process that include repertoire, strategies, and realization. Repertoire contains conventions, norms, and values that can be counted as a background of the text and guide the reader. These norms are concepts of reality which help human beings to make sense of the chaos of their experience. The text adopts a 'repertoire' of such norms and suspends their validity within its fictional world. Iser defines repertoire as "a system of literary and non-literary conventions, norms, and values which forms the nexus between the literary text and non-literary systems such as politics, religion, and philosophy in a given society" and it also "bridges the gap between fiction and society." (Zima, ١٩٩٩: ٧١, ٧٢)

Strategies are those literary techniques and devices which are given by the author to guide the reader. According to Iser, strategies are "the semantic and narrative techniques implemented by the authors to guide readers through the intricacies of the text, arranging the course of events and preparing the expected or unexpected denouement," and "the ultimate function of strategies is to

defamiliarize the familiar." (Ibid, ۷۲) and finally, Realization is the creation of meaning; the reader is the creator of meaning, and reading is a dynamic process. It is the reader's production of the meaning of the text

۱.٤.٤ Stanley Fish and Interpretive Community

An American exponent of reader-response criticism, Stanley fish examined the differences between the affective and reception aesthetics. He is one of the practitioners of affective stylistics. They argue that a literary text is an event that occur in time (that comes into being as it is read) rather that an object that exists in space. The text is examined closely in order to understand how (stylistics) it affects (affective) the reader in the process of reading.

Fish does not consider the text as an objective, autonomous entity (it does not have fixed meaning independent of readers) because the text consists of the results it produces and those results occur within the reader. When Fish describes how a text is structured, the structure he describes is the structure of the reader's response as it occurs from moment to moment. Affective stylistics is a cognitive analysis of the mental processes produced by specific elements in the text. The true writer is the reader.

In "Interpreting the Variorum" Fish delineates that "interpretive communities are made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading (in the conventional sense) but for writing texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions. In other words, these strategies exist prior to the act of reading and therefore determine the shape of what is read." (۲۰۰۰: ۳۰۴) Thus, interpretive community is a group of readers who share the same interpretive strategies. According to Fish, "interpretive communities grow and decline, and individuals move from one to another" and "interpretive strategies are not natural or universal, but learned." (Ibid) A text's meaning resides in the reading community to which a reader belongs; therefore, the social plays a significant role in Fish's mature works.

۱.٤.٥ Norman Holland and the DEFT Model

A psychological reader-response critic, Holland's method is transactive in the sense that reading involves a transaction between the reader and the text. In "Unity Identity Text Self" Holland argues that "the mother imprints on the infant, not a specific identity or even a sense of its own identity, but a 'primary identity,' itself irreversible but capable of infinite variation. This primary identity stands as an invariant which pro-vides all the later transformations of the individual, as he develops, with an unchanging inner form or core of continuity." (۱۹۷۵: ۸۱٤) Indeed, at birth we receive from our mothers a primary identity. We personalize this identity through our life experience, transforming it into our own individualized

identity theme that becomes the lens through which we see the world. Our identity theme consists of our psychological conflicts and coping strategies.

When we read literature, we project our identity theme, or variations of it, on to the text. We unconsciously recreate in the text the world that exists in our own mind. Our interpretations are products of the fears, defenses, needs, and desires we project onto the text. Thus, interpretation is a psychological process and it reveals the psychology of the reader.

Acoording to Holland, interpretation is a process consisting of three stages or modes: In defense mode, our psychological defenses are raised by the text. In the fantasy mode, we find a way to interpret the text that will tranquilize those defenses and thus fulfill our desire to be protected from threats to our psychological equilibrium. And finally, in the transformation mode, we transform the first two steps into an abstract interpretation so that we can get the psychological satisfaction we desire (without acknowledging to ourselves the anxiety-producing defenses and guilt-producing fantasies that underlie our assessment of the text.) Correspondingly, Holland proposes "DEFT" as "the best acronym" for "the defense-fantasy-transformation model of the literary experience." (Ibid, ۸۱۸)

۱.٤.٦ Re-symbolization in Bleich's Subjective Approach

An American subjective reader-response critic, David Bleich argues that the text is created by readers' responses, in the sense that there is no literary text beyond the meanings created by readers' interpretation; the text the critic analyzes is not the literary work but the written responses of readers.

In *Subjective Criticism*, Bleich argues that "linguistic articulation – naming and identification – is the symbolization of experience; interpretation is a resymbolization motivated by the demand that the knowledge thus symbolized be explained, or converted into a more subjectively satisfying form. In this way all explanations are interpretive and may be understood as the construction of new knowledge." (۱۹۷۸: ۲۱۳)

Bleich differentiates between what he calls real objects and symbolic objects. Real objects are physical objects, such as tables, chairs, etc. The printed pages of a literary text are real objects. The experience created when someone reads those printed pages (like language itself) is a symbolic object because it occurs not in the physical world but in the conceptual world, that is in the mind of the reader.

He calls reading – the feeling, associations, and memories that occur as we react subjectively to the printed words on the page- symbolization. Our perception and identification of our reading experience create a conceptual world in our mind as we read. Therefore, when we interpret the meaning of the text, we are actually interpreting the meaning of our own symbolization/ the meaning of the conceptual

experience we created in response to the text. He calls thus the act of interpretation, re-symbolization. Re-symbolization occurs when our experience of the text produces in us a desire for explanation. Our evaluation of the text quality is also an act of symbolization: we like or dislike a text; we like or dislike our symbolization of it. The text is not really the text on the page, is the text in our mind.

He argues that the readers' interpretations are experience-oriented. The sources of those interpretations lie in the personal responses evoked by the text. Indeed, they indicate how the text produced specific personal reactions and memories of personal relationships and experience. Meaning is developed when the reader works in cooperation with other readers to achieve the text's collective meaning (what he calls 'the interpretations'). Through negotiations and discussion, one can develop the text meaning. The group decides on the acceptable interpretation of the text.

۱.٤.۷ Prince's Notion of the Triplet Readers

Prince states that by observing and analyzing various signs in the text, such as pronoun reference, direct address, gender, race, social class references, and writing styles, it is possible to identify the narratee. Narratology designates the process of analyzing a story using all the elements of its telling, such as narrator, voice, style, etc. Narratee signifies the person to whom the narrator is speaking. The narrative, itself produces the narratee.

There are three different kinds of narratee: The Real reader, which means the person who is actually reading the book; The Virtual reader, who is the reader to whom the author believes he or she is writing; and The Ideal reader signifies the one who explicitly and implicitly understands all the elements, terminology, and structure of the text. Although his approach relies on textual analysis, Prince's concerns about the reader place him in the reader-oriented school of criticism.

۱.٥ Conclusion

The reading process is in close affinity with the subjective construction of meaning of the texts in the mind of the reader. The confusion of the active reader and the active text produces meaning for the reader. The meaning is always deferred and one should prevent fixed and unchangeable interpretations. Therefore, a major part of the significance of the process of Reading goes back to the highly central role played by the reader. Reader-response approach provides an extensively significant approach to reading texts in contemporary literary and cultural studies. As a critical approach, reader-oriented criticism has fully developed in terms of new specialized terminology of recent figures in this mode of approach.

Reader-response theory could be categorized into several modes including transactional, historical context, affective stylistics, psychological, subjective, social, and textual approaches. The mechanism of the process of reading could be

thus more elaborated if explored in terms of the main concepts of the approaches of the reception theory. Accordingly, the central role played by the "reader" in the reading process and the significance of the reader in the construction of meaning should be recurrently brought into consideration in the analysis of the reading process.

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