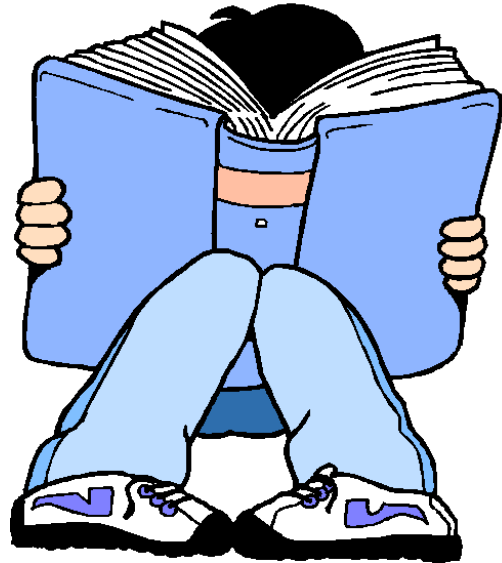


An Introduction to Literary Lenses

Literary theories were developed as a means to understand the various ways people read texts and the world around them. The proponents of each theory generally believe that their theory is *the* theory, but for our purposes we will interpret texts according to the "rules" of several different at a time. Some lenses will be more appropriate for particular works than others at times and it is your job to discern when to use a particular lens. The following theories are just that, *theories*. Approach them as you would a scientist, without any emotional attachment to any particular one. You do not have to believe or agree with a theory to understand and correctly apply it. Your goal is to understand the literary theories below.



Reader Response Criticism

✓ Where Did It Come From?

- It basically functions as a response to classical and new criticism, which held the belief that the text was the center of analysis.

✓ Reader Response Criticism Explained

- Reader + Text = Meaning
- Literature is a performative event and each reading is a performance, analogous to playing/singing a musical work, enacting a drama, etc. Literature exists only when it is read; meaning is an event.
- Reader Response Criticism is rooted in the branch of philosophy known as Phenomenology, which can be basically defined as "method of inquiry based on the premise that reality consists of objects and events as they are perceived or understood in human consciousness and not of anything independent of human consciousness." In other words, knowledge does not exist in the external world, but only in one's mental perception of the external world.
- The literary text possesses no fixed and final meaning or value; there is no one "correct" meaning. Literary meaning and value are "transactional," "dialogic," created by the interaction of the reader and the text.
- Reading is an incredibly energetic act. The reader does not wait for meaning to announce itself, but guesses, arranges details, speculates, closes gaps, and contends with "indeterminacies."
- Each reader comes to a text within the framework of her horizons of expectation. A text will constantly challenge these expectations, moving the reader to a series of unique positions relative to the text.

✓ Wolfgang Iser's Three Readers

- The Real Reader - the actual person reading the text, with all of her cultural experiences.
- The Virtual Reader - the one that the author assumes is reading the book.

➤ The Ideal Reader - the best prepared and most knowledgeable readers.

✓ **Louise Rosenblatt**

➤ "A poem is what the reader lives through under the guidance of the text and experiences as relevant to the text." She wrote *Literature as Exploration* in 1937, pushing Reader Response Criticism to the forefront.

➤ She argued that there were two types of reading:

1. Efferent: the search for newly gained information, not the words themselves
2. Aesthetic: the desire to experience the text, its sounds, words, and patterns

➤ When reading, the reader and the text share a transactional experience. Simultaneously, the text:

1. Is a stimulus for past experiences, thoughts, and ideas of the reader
2. And a blueprint for selecting, ordering, limiting ideas that best match the text.

➤ The result? A New Creation, which has a limited, but not exclusive number of plausible interpretations.

✓ **Stanley Fish (Affective Stylistics)**

➤ Meaning is not something extracted from a text, but negotiated, line by line. Meaning is what happens to readers.

➤ Readers create a piece of literature as they read it.

➤ The text, according to Fish, as an independent director of interpretation, disappears.

➤ Readers divide themselves into interpretive communities, who tend to read for the same meanings in literature. Some of these interpretive communities are the same communities that we have discussed as schools of literary criticism.

✓ **Criticism of Reader Response Criticism**

➤ Text-oriented critics argue that Reader Response is nothing more than a form of anarchic subjectivity that allows readers to interpret a text any way they want.

➤ Another objection is the idea that Reader Response criticism seems to undervalue the idea that a text can provide new understanding for a reader.

➤ E.D. Hirsch argues in *Validity in Interpretation* that while we cannot know for certain what a writer intended in his/her work; our interpretation must be constrained by probable intent. If one intended, for example, to argue that "Araby" was a critique of European colonialism, he/she would have to contend with the enormous evidence that the story is primarily concerned with religious themes.

✓ **Reader Response Criticism Strategies**

➤ Move through the text in a super-slow describing the reaction of an informed reader at various points.

➤ Or describe your own response moving through the text

➤ React to the text as a whole, embracing and expressing the subjective and personal response it engenders.

