**Reader Response Criticism**

[**http://www1.assumption.edu/users/ady/HHGateway/Gateway/Approaches.html**](http://www1.assumption.edu/users/ady/HHGateway/Gateway/Approaches.html)

**Historical Background**

**Classical Roots**

* Both **Plato** and **Aristotle** were aware of the effects of works of literature. Plato, in fact, worried that poets would stir up the emotions of the audience. He also believed that art, as a copy of a copy, was at a furthest remove from "truth" and therefore misled people. In his ***Republic*** he excludes poets from his ideal society.
* **Aristotle**, the first formalist (and first "Structuralist" in literary criticism, was also conscious of the significance of specific rhetorical effects of works of art. In his discussion of tragic form (found in the ***Poetics*** ), he tells us that tragic plays elicit from spectators the feelings of pity and fear. Furthermore, another portion of his descriptive analysis of tragic form refers to "proper magnitude" in plays. This probably meant that dramatists must not overload the audience with complicated plots or excess information.
* As Bressler tells us, both of these ancient writers assumed that the audience is **passive**: the text works on the mind as if the mind were acted upon, much like a wax tablet or a mirror.

**Reader-Response Criticism in the 20th Century:**

* As we have learned, [**New Criticism**](http://www1.assumption.edu/users/ady/HHGateway/Gateway/Approaches.html#New Criticism/Formalism)exerted a powerful influence upon the way critics read literature and teachers taught literature well into the 1960's. Especially in America and Britain, you were not taken seriously as a reader or critic if you did not espouse the tenets of New Criticism.
* In the midst of this hegemony of New Criticism, **Louis Rosenblatt** proposed a different model for literary analysis. In *Literature as Exploration* (1937) she proposed her **transactional theory**, in which she saw reading as a transaction between reader and text. Meaning is as dependent upon the reader as it is dependent upon the text. There is no universal, absolute interpretation of a poem; rather, there can be several **probable** interpretations, depending in part upon what the reader brings to the text. For Rosenblatt, the reader is not passive.
* **Rosenblatt**, by the way, agreed with **New Critics**' emphasis upon **close reading.** Reading is a transaction in which readers, while bringing their world of experience to activate the text, respect the text on its own terms. She acknowledged that some interpretations were better than others.

**Types of Reader-Response Critics**

**Rhetorical criticism**

* Analyzes texts in terms of rhetorical strategies embedded to influence readers. These critics, for example, might see **plot** as an arrangement of certain effects: moving us to first question events, giving us partial, teasing answers, deliberately delaying discovery of information, surprising us with new information or reversal of expectations, and so on. This approach assumes that the text exerts more control over the interpretive process than the reader.

**Structuralist approaches to reader-response**

* + Describes the codes readers acquire and use to ascertain meaning. Since codes change across time, interpretations vary.

**Phenomenologists**

* Studies how the mind processes texts. Hans Robert **Jauss**, a **reception theorist**, studies how **horizons of expectation** change with time, thereby changing the way audiences interpret texts. Wolfgang **Iser** (pronounced "ee-zer") analyzes the text's effect on both the **implied reader** and the **actual reader**. Iser's **implied reader** is the reader implied by the text--the hypothetical reader predisposed to appreciate the effects of the text. In other words, what sort of reader does this text seem to address: how informed about the nuances of words, history, conventions, strategies of irony, etc. In experimental "modernist" texts (like Joyce's *Ulysses*or Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* , we might ask, "What kind of reader does this challenging text attempt to create?" (A question a rhetorical critic might ask as well, by the way)
* **Iser** also discusses ways in which texts are **concretized** in the mind. He will discuss ways in which texts call upon and alter the reader's own horizons of expectations. How, in other words, does a novel set us up to expect something only to deliver something else. Iser also discusses **gaps** in the text: places in which the text expects us to fill in information or otherwise use our imagination.
* From all of this it is clear that we have come a long way from Aristotle's view of the audience as passive. For Iser, readers create the text, filling in gaps, anticipating what is to come, all along using their own for-understanding (their world of beliefs/values) to process the work. Sometimes the text subverts that pre-understanding, creating disturbing effects; sometimes it confirms it.

**Subjective Reader Response Criticism**

* Here the text is subordinated to the individual reader. The subject becomes the individual reader as he reveals himself in the act of reading. For example, imagine a reader outraged by a story in which a father ignores his child. The intensity of the reader's reaction may lie in his or her conflicted relationship with his or her father.
* This kind of criticism has been attacked as too relativistic and of limited usefulness in the classroom. Defenders of this approach point out that literature must work on a personal, emotional level to move us powerfully. Steven **Mailloux**, urges that students be allowed their personal, powerful reaction, but then expect to make his responses relevant to an interpretive community.

**Assumptions** Meaning = text + reader

**Methodology**

* Varies with each of the types listed above. In general, the reader-response critic looks to ways in which a literary text affects the reader intellectually and affectively. **Close reading** is still an important activity; in this case the critic looks carefully at how the text stimulates the work of the reader.