LITERARY THEORY

READER RESPONSE CRITICISM

Definition and Description:
Reader Response Criticism is a way to look at text through the eyes of a reader. However, there are several methods in which a reader response critic can look at a text. Several theorists have found a number of ways to make meaning from text which includes: a structuralist lens, a phenomenologist lens, a subjective lens, or even an affective stylistics lens. All of these lenses have a specific way they look at a text, or a reader, or just the interaction that happens between the text and the reader. What all these theorists do have in common is that they look to the reader for interpretation as opposed to just the text.

Key People:
- Claude Lévi-Strauss
- David Bleich
- Gaston Bachelor
- George Poulet
- Gerald Prince
- Gerard Genette
- Hans Robert Jauss
- Henry James
- I.A. Richards
- Jonathan Culler
- Louise M. Rosenblatt
- Michael Riffaterre
- Naomi Schor
- Norman Holland
- Roland Barthes
- Roman Ingarden
- Roman Jakobson
- Stanley Fish
- Tzvetan Todorov
- Walker Gibson
- Wayne C. Booth
- Wolfgang Iser

Websites:
- http://www.hu.mtu.edu/reader
- http://divinity.lib.vanderbilt.edu/div/2504/reader.htm, http://www.mdk12.org/practices/good_instruction/projectbetter/elangarts/ela-28-30.html
- http://www.brocku.ca/english/courses/4F70/rr.html

Key Terms:
- **Actual reader:** the person who physically reads the text.
- **Aesthetic reading:** live through the transactional experience of creating the poem.
- **Affective stylistics/reception aesthetics:** gaining interpretation through interpretive communities and the reader's subjective experience
- **Appetencies:** a personally acceptable vision of the world
- **Defense mode:** psychological defenses are raised by the text
- **Determinate meaning:** facts of the text provided on the page
- **Efferent reading:** focus on information contained in the text
- **Fantasy mode:** interpreting text to fulfill our desire to be protected from threats to our psychological equilibrium
- **Forestructure:** the interpretive process the reader brings
- **Grammar:** the system of rules that directs literary interpretation

- **Horizons of expectations:** what the public already understands about a genre and its conventions
- **Ideal/implied reader:** The reader the author has in mind that will understand the author's intention
- **Identity theme:** personalized identity from our mothers through life's experiences; the lens we see the world through
- **Indeterminacies:** "gaps" in the text which must be filled for the text to be complete or whole, to create meaning
- **Interpretation:** when reader "resymbolizes" his/her response to give it meaning or coherence
- **Interpretive community:** a group of readers who share the same interpretive strategies
- **Intertextuality:** negotiations with other readers and other texts
- **Narratee:** who the narrator addresses
- **Narratology:** the process of analyzing a story using all the elements involved in its telling (narrator, voice, style, verb tense, personal pronouns, audience, etc)
- **Phenomenology:** a transactional experience when interpreting a text
- **Poem:** the result of an *event* that takes place during the reading process; "aesthetic transaction"
- **readerly works:** readers are consumers of an author's meaning
- **Real reader:** person actually reading the text
- **Reception theory:** Examining the changing response to a work on the part of the general reading public over a period of time
- **Response:** personal symbolization of the text
- **Rhetoric:** the art of persuasion; the myriad devices or strategies used to get the reader to respond to the literary work in certain ways
- **Semiotics:** A science of signs that studies how meaning occurs and how structures allow it to operate
- **Structuralism:** critics approach textual analysis as if it were a science
- **Structuralists:** Critics who seek to uncover the rules and codes by which a work is written and read to reveal the grammar of literature by following principles of linguistic theory
- **Subjective criticism:** the reader's thoughts, beliefs, and experiences play a greater part than the actual text in shaping a works meanings
- **Transaction experience:** text acts as a stimulus for eliciting various past experiences, thoughts and ideas from the reader
- **Transactional analysis:** how the reader interprets a text and the response produced
- **Transactional:** Interact with the text
- **Transformational mode:** transform the defense and fantasy mode into an abstract interpretation so that we can get the psychological satisfaction we desire
- **Virtual reader:** the reader to whom the author believes he/she is writing
- **Writerly texts:** demand that readers actually produce their own versions of texts as they read them

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Questions:

- Does the reader manipulate the text or does the text manipulate the reader to produce meaning?
- Does some word, phrase, or image trigger a specific interpretation, or does the reader approach the text with a conscious or unconscious collection of learned reading strategies that impose an interpretation on the text?
- Is the reading process linear or nonlinear, and is it predictable?
- Can texts deliberately try to mislead the reader, thereby causing readers to make predictable mistakes?
- How can we differentiate between what is in the text and what is in the reader's mind?
- What is and what happens during the reading process?
- Who is the actual reader? The implied reader? The ideal reader?
- What are some gaps you see in the text?
- Can you list several horizons of expectations and show how they change from a text's beginning to its conclusion?
- Can you articulate your identity theme as you develop your personal interpretation of a particular text?
- What is the difference between your response to a text and your interpretation?

Structuralist Approach

- What did the author intend for you to feel while reading this work, and how did he or she make you feel it?
- What are you dependent on in this work to help you make sense of what you read (i.e. descriptive passages, the narrator's voice, contrasting viewpoints of character)?
- Are there opposites in the text that surprise you? (Inform you? Keep you from anticipating what is coming?)
- How do your previous experiences with this genre set up your expectations for how this text will operate?
- What images and events in the story are you already conditioned to approve or disapprove?
- How does the point of view affect (or control) your understanding?
- How does the text call upon what you know of the world to produce your response to the work?
- What events or experiences were you led to anticipate? (What mysteries were you asked to solve? What judgments were you expected to make?)

The reader as producer of the text

- What did you expect to feel while reading this work?
- What does the work fail to tell you about characters and/or events?
- What was unsettling in what you read? How did you adapt what made you uncomfortable so that it fit what you desired?
- With what or whom did you most closely identify in the work? (What identification gave you the most pleasure? The most displeasure?)

- What memories does this work recall for you?
- If you reread this work using a different strategy, how would it become a different work?

The reader and the text as co-producers

- What kind of reader is implied by this text?
- What aspects of the text invite you to respond as the implied reader?
- How do you as an actual reader differ from the implied?
- What gaps and vague outlines did you find yourself filling in?
- How did your perceptions and responses change as the work unfolded? (What caused them to change?)
- What contradictions did you perceive in the text (characters that represent differing viewpoints? How did you resolve them?)
- What experiences of your own have you used to visualize and understand those presented in the text?

Transactional reader-response theory

- How does the interaction of text and reader create meaning?
- How does the text's indeterminacy function as a stimulus to interpretation?
- How does the text lead us to correct our interpretations as we read?

Affective Stylistics

- What does the phrase-by–phrase analysis of a text tell us about reading experience prestructured by (built into) that text?
- How does analysis of what the text *does* to the reader differ from what the text "says" or "means"?
- How might we interpret a literary text to show that the reader's response is, or is analogous to, the topic of the story? (How is the text really about readers reading, and what, exactly, does it tell us about this topic?)

Psychological Reader-response theory

- What seems to be a given author's identity theme, and how does that theme express itself in the sum of his or her literary output?

Social or psychological reader-response theory

- What does the body of criticism published about a literary text suggest about the critics who interpreted that text and/or about the reading experience produced by that text?
- What does your analysis suggest about the ways in which the text is created by reader's interpretive strategies or by their psychological or ideological projections?

Subjective Reader-Response Theory

- What can you learn about the role of readers' interpretive strategies or expectations, about the reading experience produced by a particular text, or about any other reading activity by conducting your own study using a group of real readers?