

READER-RESPONSE THEORY

- It is very easy to say that it is the **reader who breathes meaning into the text.** Following Roland Barthes, one can declare that the author is dead and the reader is the author/creator.
- Another question is the role of the text that triggers the response of the reader.
- For example, the same kind of reader reads the comic strip or a detective story and Shakespeare or Joyce in different ways. In other words, it is also the text that invites the reader to produce meaning in different ways.

EVOLUTION AND CORE TENETS

- Reader-response criticism is based on ideas drawn from **Phenomenology and Hermeneutics**. Phenomenology is the study of **how we understand the world** and hermeneutics is a **theory of textual interpretation**, especially those exists dealing with human acts, products and life.
- Phenomenology deals with psychology and social theory
- As a movement in philosophy, it began in the late nineteenth century and the founder of this movement was **the German theorist Edmund Husserl (1859-1938)**.

Edmund Husserl

- Husserl proposed that the real aim of philosophical study is not to examine the external objects in the world but the process by which the **objects appear to the mind (consciousness) of a perceiver.**
- He stated that the objects in the world are as they appear and the **perceiver gives meaning to them.**
- Thus, in Husserl's philosophy, the perceiver's role is very important in determining the meaning of objects. It leads to a simple view that the **human mind is the centre and origin of all meaning.**

Martin Heidegger

- Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) German philosopher and Husserl's student, **rejected his view that the perceiver alone projects meaning** onto the things of the world.
- He made it clear that while the perceiver's mind (consciousness) projects the things of the world, **the world also affects his mind.**
- **It is not a one – sided process;** the mind (consciousness) affects and is affected in turn.
- He further explained that consciousness is situated in a certain place and time and this situatedness always affects our understanding of the world.

Hans-Georg Gadamer

- Heidegger's theory influenced another German theorist, Hans-Georg Gadamer(1900-2002). He applied Heidegger's situational approach to literary theory in Truth and Method(1975).
- He argued that **literary works do not appear in the world with one final meaning**. The meaning is decided by the **historical situation of the interpreter**.
- In other words, our present perspective and understanding involves a **fusion with the past**.

Hans Robert Jauss

- Hans Robert Jauss a German theorist and a follower of Gadamer is an important exponent of the **Reception Theory** .
- Jauss argues that readers use different criteria at different periods, which he calls 'horizon and expectations', to judge the nature of literariness in a text.
- **What appeals to one generation of readers at a given period may not interest readers at some other period.**

Wolfgang Iser

- Wolfgang Iser (1926-2007) is another seminal critic who practised reader-response theory.
- He removes contexts and history from the act of interpretation and brings the text and the reader in closed exchange.
- He argues that there are possibilities of many meanings and they can be discovered through the interaction between the text and the reader. In his work *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (1978), he builds his theory of interpretation.
- Iser's argument is that the text contains 'gaps' or 'blanks' (that is, it does not tell everything) and the readers must fill in these gaps so as to build meaning/s.

Wolfgang Iser

- **Wolfgang Iser divides the readers into two classes – ‘implied reader’ and ‘actual reader’.** The implied reader is in agreement with the text.
- The **actual reader gets certain impressions from the text but at the same time he/she brings his/her own experiences to bear on the impressions received from the text.**
- In other words, the reader brings a large stained glass that has its own colours and patterns, but the text has another glass with many colours. The two glasses are juxtaposed face to face in the process of reading. The reader’s experience and existing consciousness will have to make certain internal adjustment in order to receive and process the viewpoints that the texts present as the reading progresses.

Stanley E. Fish

- The American critic Stanley E. Fish (b-1938) in his pursuit of reader-response criticism offered a new technique called **affective stylistics**. Fish argued that **meaning is not something inherent in a literary text, waiting to be extracted. It should be negotiated by readers.**
- **But Fish's readers are not ordinary readers are not ordinary readers.** They are 'informed readers' who know literary conventions and who are ready to change with the changing appeal of the text. In his 'Is There a Text' in This Class? (1980) he modified his position and held that readers recreated the text they read.
- In this landmark work, he proposes his theory of **interpretive community**, which states that informed readers share certain common assumptions about texts and they **recreated texts** when they use these assumptions in their reading. It means that readers share the same or similar **interpretive strategies** and become members of the same **interpretive community**.

Criticism of Reader Response Theory

- **Formalists and New Criticism** have criticised reader response theory as 'anarchic subjectivism', as responses to a text.
- Each time neither the reader nor the text is constant. If one takes it seriously, in reading a poem, the reader in the first stanza is different from the reader in the last stanza. **No reader can read a given text in the same way at different times, unless growth has stopped.**
- But one thing is certain-**the reader –oriented approaches have brought the reader to the centre – stage.**