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Reader Response Theory

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M. H. Abrams once argued in *The Mirror and the Lamp* (1953) that the "situation" of the literary text could be understood in terms of four basic coordinates or relations: the *expressive*, which is the relation of the text to its author; the *pragmatic*, which is the relation of text to audience; the *mimetic*, which is the relation of text to the world; and the *objective*, which is the relation of the text to itself as a self-contained autonomous object. The attention given to these various relations has fluctuated as new models and paradigms of reading and criticism displace what went before. Reader-response criticism emphasizes the pragmatic relation of text to audience and came into prominence in the 1970s and 1980s as a rejection of the *new criticism*, a theory of reading that had previously dominated literature teaching in the English Departments of North American universities. This reader-oriented approach has been given emphasis in a number of studies written within the library and information science (LIS) field (Pawley 2002; Ross 1999; Vandergrift 1986; Wiegand 1998). It has also been used as the theoretical framework for studies such as Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* (1984) or Elizabeth Long's *Book Clubs* (2003), which have been adopted within LIS as key texts in the ethnography of reading.

For LIS researchers interested in the relation between readers and texts, reader-response criticism is valuable because it foregrounds the activity of the reader who constructs meaning from black marks on the page. Research performed within the framework of reader-response theory asks questions about the agency of the reader: What is the reader doing when she reads? What is the relation between the reader and the text? What happens in the process of the reader's making sense of texts? This emphasis on the active reader distinguishes reader-response theory from the theoretical framework used in earlier reading studies conducted

in the library field. When the Graduate Library School was established at the University of Chicago in 1928, for example, reading research was selected as a field of particular importance for librarianship and pursued with energy by the School's faculty such as Douglas Waples, Leon Carnovsky, and Louis R. Wilson (Karetsky 1982, pp. 50–52). The tacit assumption underlying their work was that good literature had good effects on readers, hence the importance of judicious book selection and energetic steps to direct readers toward the best books. This text-active theory of reading takes it for granted that the text is comprised of fixed and determinate textual features that are undeniably *there* and have predictable effects on readers; that is, meanings inhere within the text itself and get swallowed whole like a pill. This model is encapsulated in the title of one of Waples's co-authored books, *What Reading Does to People* (1940).

The text-active model of reading that undergirded the sociological studies of reading within the library field in the 1930s and '40s was compatible with the new criticism, which dominated departments of English Literature. The new criticism was interested in what Abrams (1953) called the "objective relation," the attention to the text as a self-contained autonomous object. For the new criticism, the production of meaning was the result of the impersonal operation of a system of signs organizing the form of the text. The proper way to read was the "close reading" of formal elements of the text—its images, themes, patterns of sound, and use of literary conventions—with a view to uncovering the text's unity.

The undermining of this text-active model of reading by reader-response criticism has involved a replacement of the construct of the determinate text by the construct of the reader actively involved in making sense of the text. Influential theorists such as Wolfgang Iser, Hans Robert Jauss, Norman Holland, David Bleich, Stanley Fish, and others wrote about the role of the reader in studies that came to be called reader-response criticism or reception theory. By 1980, three influential books focusing on reader-response signaled that a marked shift of attention had occurred from the autonomous text to the active reader (Fish 1980; Suleiman & Crosman 1980; Tompkins 1980). "The words *reader* and *audience*," writes Susan Suleiman, in her introduction to one of these collections of reader-oriented critical articles, "once relegated to

the status of the unproblematic and obvious, have acceded to a starring role" (Suleiman & Crosman, 1980, p. 3). Now the text's meaning is thought to be constituted by the reader's activity in bringing certain horizons of expectations to the text, in selecting which features of the text to attend to, and in responding to these features. Wolfgang Iser (1978) thought of the text as a set of instructions for meaning production, which readers will follow according to their competencies. Even with competent readers, however, variations in interpretations occur because there are always "gaps" in the text that readers have to fill in by drawing on their own experience and imagination.

Others went further in shifting power to the reader and in questioning the notion of the reader as a passive consumer swallowing the whole meanings produced by others. In an influential essay entitled "Reading as Poaching," Michel de Certeau (1984, pp. 169-170) argued that the reader "invents in texts something different from what [their authors] 'intended'. . . . He combines their fragments and creates something unknown. . . . Whether it is a question of newspapers or Proust, the text has a meaning only through its readers; it changes along with them; it is ordered in accord with codes of perception that it does not control." Similarly, in the field of cultural studies, Stuart Hall (1980) has also been interested in readers' compliance with, or resistance to, hegemonic texts and has identified "dominant," "negotiated," and "oppositional" styles of reading.

One drawback for LIS researchers who want to consider reading as a species of information behavior is that most of these reader-oriented theorists were not interested in actual, empirical readers. They focused instead on the role of idealized implied readers, intended readers, mock readers, competent readers, and so on, all of whom had to be inferred from the text. Researchers interested in studying actual readers have found more help from Louise Rosenblatt whose classic text *Literature as Exploration* (1938/1995) outlines a persuasive theory of reading as a transaction. This book, neglected for many years and now rediscovered, has been influential, especially among educational researchers. In it, Rosenblatt described the readers' processes of engagement as they use an array of strategies to construct meaning from the black marks on the page. She claims that the reader "brings to the work personality traits, memories of past events, present needs and preoccupations, a particular

mood of the moment, and a particular physical condition. These and many other elements, in a never-to-be-duplicated combination, determine his response to the peculiar contribution of the text" (Rosenblatt, 1995, pp. 30-31).

For those researchers who are interested in the reading behaviors of real readers, the choice among theories of reading has implications for the research questions asked and the research methodologies chosen. Reader-response criticism put an emphasis on what readers do when reading and shifted the emphasis from the self-contained text to the relationship between text and reader. A fruitful area for reading studies has opened up that goes beyond close readings of texts and large-scale surveys of readers to include intensive interviews with individual readers and ethnographies of reading.

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