Is there a text on this paper?

Before the advent of what we called reader response criticism, no one was interested in these kinds of questions. Formalist strategies of reading, which make little reference to the social or political contexts in which a text is produced, may seem quite alien to those of us producing literary criticism in the twenty-first century. If we want to know why this is, then the answer can be found in the changes to reading texts that took place in the 1970s and 1980s. In this period began a growing concern for how a text affects individual readers – and also communities of readers. This theory, called reader response theory, or reception theory, dramatically shifted the way in which texts are now read. Once readers become part of the meaning of the text, their own place in the world becomes important. The context of reading becomes hugely important. Moreover, meaning becomes much less certain and more unstable. If there is no longer an ideal reader but simply many different readers, the text becomes a dynamic and changing entity.

Rejecting formalism

Reader response theory can be seen as a rejection of the scientific, objective approach of formalism and new criticism. It first emerged during the 1970s in Germany, where the academics Wolfgang Iser (1926–2007)and Hans Jauss (1921–97) led a group of scholars concerned with the reception of literary texts.

🔑 Key idea

Reception refers to the creation of meaning of a text by a reader.

Jauss and Iser were influenced by a number of earlier developments. In particular, reader response theory owes much to a school of philosophy called phenomenology. Established by the German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) in the early twentieth century, phenomenology examines the

relationship between subjective, human consciousness and the real objects of the physical world; what matters is not objects in themselves but, rather, the lived experience of them. Reader response theory translates this into the idea of studying how humans experience texts.

Iser published his ideas about reception in two key works, *The Implied Reader* (1972) and *The Act of Reading* (1976). In his earlier book, Iser argues that the text exists between two poles. The first, the artistic pole, is the text the author creates, while the other, the aesthetic pole, is the text as the reader receives it. Only by taking together the actual text and the reader's conception of it can we get to the actual literary text. Without the reader, the practice of meaning creation is incomplete. In *The Act of Reading* Iser complicates the idea of a hypothetical or ideal reader. He says that the ideal reader is merely an abstract created by the critic, and is therefore meaningless. We don't know any ideal readers, so it is pointless to talk about them because all we are really doing is talking about our own ideal reading, or a kind of authorial intention. Equally, however, the 'real' reader is elusive and almost impossible for us to gain access to. Iser suggests instead an 'implied reader' who is the active reading force in the creation of meaning alongside the plot, the narrator(s) and the characters. The implied reader has no particular characteristics but is always there as part of the process.

Key idea

The implied reader is the reader we imagine when we are talking about the meaning of a literary text.

'The possible reader must be visualized as playing a particular role with particular characteristics, which may vary according to circumstances. And so, just as the author divides himself up into the narrator of the story and the

commentator of the events in the story, the reader is also stylized to a certain degree, being given attributes which he may either accept or reject.'

Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (1974)

INTERPRETIVE COMMUNITIES

A parallel movement towards the reader began at the same time in the United States, through the work of Stanley Fish (1938–). Fish began his critical career investigating reader responses to the work of John Milton. These works, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, paved the way for an essay 'Interpreting the *Variorum'* (1976), in which Fish shifts his focus from individual readers to how those readers create meanings in the context of other readers. In order to explore this contextualized reading, Fish uses the term 'interpretive communities'.

Key idea

An interpretive community is a group of readers who share a context for their readings of a literary text.

Fish argues that there are multiple acts of reading that produce multiple meanings. One thing that contextualizes this is the specific time and place of reading. In particular, academic communities such as universities define literary value to direct how words are engaged with. In *Is There a Text in this Class*? (1980), Fish uses an example of writing a list of names on a chalk board and asking a group of students to analyse that group of names, pretending to them that it is a poem, in an exercise very similar to the one you engaged with at the opening of this chapter. Given this institutional context, the students behave as if the text is a poem and give literary evaluations.

As an example, let's take a look at some lines of writing:

> If lilies are lily white if they exhaust noise and distance and even dust, if they dusty will dirt a surface that has no extreme grace, if they do this and

> it is not necessary it is not at all necessary if they do this they need a catalogue.

How would you define this? On the page, these lines look like prose. They are, however, in fact part of a poem called 'Objects' (1914) by Gertrude Stein (1874–1946). One might argue that they are only poetry because they are included in a poem and thus defined as such. Out of this context, they become prose description. Like Fish's example, we can see here how the community shapes reading. Those who read this text in a book of poems, having decided that a poem can be a prose poem, will read it as poetry. Those who have defined poetry differently, however, and expect a different visual appearance on the page, will define it as prose. While Stein's intention here is signalled by the inclusion of these words in a poem, this only limits the reading when it is received in that context.

'Interpretive communities are made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading (in the conventional sense) but for writing texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions.'

Stanley Fish, 'Interpreting the *Variorum*' (1976)

Unacceptable readings?

To this point, we have presented reader response theory as a rather positive space, in which all voices are heard and all readers are valued equally. Reader response critics have to consider, however, what to do when readings are produced that challenge the interpretive community.

- What, for example, about readings that take a text completely out of context?

- What about readings that are the complete opposite of the established readings?

- In short, can a reading ever be 'wrong'?

Spotlight

In a recent online list of funny answers to literature exam questions comes the following:

> Writing at the same time as Shakespeare was Miguel Cervantes. He wrote *Donkey Hote*. The next great author was John Milton. Milton wrote *Paradise Lost*. Then his wife died and he wrote *Paradise Regained*.

Case study: The Rushdie Affair

A powerful example of interpretive communities can be seen in the events surrounding the publication in 1988 of Salman Rushdie's controversial novel *The Satanic Verses*. Following uproar from certain segments of the Muslim community regarding the novel's content, in 1989 the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini of Iran issued a *fatwa* ordering Muslims to kill Rushdie. The author went into hiding in London, from which he emerged only in 1998.

Readers were particular outraged by one particular scene in the novel, in which one of the central characters visits a brothel where the women are named after the prophet Mohammad's wives. In addition, the novel hints, through the presence of a poet named Baal who is sceptical about Mohammad's abilities, that a number of verses removed from the Qur'an for supposedly being falsely given to Mohammad by the devil (the so-called Satanic Verses) were perhaps removed for other reasons, part of a larger lack of authenticity. Finally, the novel was criticized for its use of derogatory terms such as Mahound for Mohammad and Jahilia for Mecca. On 2 December 1988, 7,000 Muslims in the town of Bolton staged the first demonstration against the book, which included publicly burning it.

Much attention has been given to how many of the critics of Rushdie's novel had not in fact read it – they had only seen distributed extracts that took the brothel scene out of its satirical context. An interpretive community was formed that 'read' the novel as offensive without regard for its overall content. Against this, other interpretive communities of Muslim readers, such as the Southall Black Sisters, campaigned in support of Rushdie. This vitriolic response shows the power of interpretive

communities in defining the meaning of a text: the novel polarized the opinions of those who read it (Muslim and non-Muslim), opinions that were largely determined by reading contexts. In reality, *The Satanic Verses* was satirical, something which those opposing it seemed to ignore. However, at the same time, there is some suggestion that Rushdie knew his novel would be found offensive and that he intentionally tried to stir up controversy. He made the women in the brothel chaste, and made the man who calls Mohammad by the name Mahound an unreliable figure, thus attempting to create a problematic text in which it is possible to be offended but difficult to uphold one's offence. In this respect, although many interpreters of the text had not read it, the meaning of the text lay fluidly between these absolute positions in ways that make attitudes to criticisms of the novel (yet not the *fatwa*) somewhat complex.

Spotlight

A number of contemporary novelists have used the Rushdie Affair as subject matter. In his novel *The Black Album* (1995), the satirical British author Hanif Kureishi includes a scene to parody responses to the Rushdie Affair, in which a young group of men defend the sanctity of a 'holy aubergine'. In *White Teeth* (2000), Zadie Smith follows the lives of twin brothers, one of whom attends protests against the publication of Rushdie's novel.

Our resistance to readings such as those that violently opposed *The Satanic Verses* rests upon the fact that they are incomplete readings of the text. It seems easy to argue against these but, at the same time, they are evidence of how meaning exists beyond a written text in the dynamic relationship between the text and its context. Meaning, then, becomes a matter not of the text but of its creation through the individual reader, who is part of an interpretive community.

If a text has been read, in its entirety and with great care, it is even more tempting to want to say no, there cannot be a 'wrong' reading. But what if, for example, a diligent reader said that Voldemort was the hero of *Harry Potter*, that Jane Eyre was a villain, or that (as happened in one of my classes) a book written in the first half of the twentieth century was about the HIV crisis?

The short answer to this question is that reader response theory asks us to be sensitive. We have to say that some readings are factually wrong. For example, it is not possible to say that Nancy doesn't die in *Oliver Twist* (1838) or that Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) marries Mr Bingley. These readings are prevented by the reader's central concern with uncovering the intention of an imagined author, which means they play close attention to the codes and structures the author has provided.

If we return, however, to the example of the student who said that an early twentieth-century novel was about the HIV crisis that did not happen until the 1980s, it is possible to amend rather than dismiss this reading. The novel cannot be 'about' the HIV crisis, because the device of historical context makes this impossible. The text can, however, contain themes that resonate with that later historical moment. That a reader might spot these resonances and that the text is a transformative space in which those resonances shape how the text is read is as important to a reader response critic as the surface meaning.

Equally, one can argue, for example, that Voldemort's exclusion as a young man from an elite represented by Harry's parents can produce a reading in which his vengeance is, from a Marxist perspective, a mirror of violent revolution against ruling power structures. Likewise, if one reads *Jane Eyre* (1847) from a postcolonial rather than feminist perspective and identifies with Rochester's first wife Bertha, then Jane in fact can become the villain of the novel: the representative of white, Anglican colonial supremacist attitudes. These readings are not in line with our perception of authorial intention. It is therefore important to note that reader response theory shares with formalism a belief in the intentional fallacy. While it reintroduces questions of affect and context, this is very much in the service of privileging possible different interpretations of the text and understanding how those readings come to exist, not in getting closer to any 'essential', author-driven reading.

Case study: *The Lord of the Rings*

When J. R. R. Tolkien wrote *The Lord of the Rings* (1954), he intended it as a new mythology for Britain. His work was shaped by his Catholic faith, his experience of the First World War and his profound attachment to nature. When, however, *The Lord of the Rings* became a massive publishing success ten years after its initial publication, readers associated it with very different meanings – with liberal values including drug use and free love. The text that led Leonard Nimoy, otherwise known for playing Mr Spock in *Star Trek*, to record a song entitled 'Bilbo Baggins' and that saw fans wearing pin badges declaring their support for the Hobbit seems a very different one. Asked about the craze surrounding the novel, and plagued by phone calls to his home by adoring fans, Tolkien merely replied that 'many young Americans are involved with the stories in a way that I am not'.

Tolkien's own response, in which he refuses to say that such readings are 'wrong', points to his own belief in the openness of the text. In an early essay, 'On Fairy Stories' (1947), Tolkien writes of his desire for texts that include what he calls 'applicability': the possibility for a range of different meanings to be applied to a text because of its inherent openness. While Tolkien may have been annoyed at the telephone calls he kept receiving in his retirement, the nuisance only reflected his success in achieving the expansive fiction he so believed in.

'Readerly' and 'writerly'

One question raised by Tolkien's theory is whether some texts are more open to reader response than others. This idea is also important in the theory of the (post)structuralist philosopher Roland Barthes. Barthes divides literature into 'readerly' texts and 'writerly' texts. The former – readerly texts – for Barthes make up the majority of literary works. These are texts in which meaning is largely fixed and the role of the reader is a passive one. By strategies of description and direction, these texts limit the possibility of multiple meanings. In contrast, writerly texts are a rarer group of works that allow the reader an active role in creating meaning. With many possible meanings, the reader becomes the writer of the text. Rather than there being one stable meaning, a multitude of different meanings emerge.

As a poststructuralist, Barthes is interested in a deconstructive process whereby what is hidden in a text is, through analysis, revealed. Thus, although there may seem to be a sharp distinction between readerly and writerly texts, in fact the situation is more complicated. Writerly texts merely

reveal the instability of meanings that a readerly text tries to obscure. What makes a text readerly or writerly is also a complicated question – for while the author may in part be responsible for this effect in their conscious decisions, it is also a characteristic that is shaped by readers and the interpretive communities they form. For Barthes, the ideal text was a writerly one: his desire for non-linear, open texts predicts much about postmodern literature.

Spotlight

Barthes spent much of his life in poor health, which seriously disrupted his education. He died, however, as a result of an accident: he was knocked down in a Paris street by a laundry van while walking home from a lunch party held by the future President of France, François Mitterand.

'The writerly text is a perpetual present, upon which no consequent *language (which would inevitably make it past) can be superimposed; the writerly text is* ourselves writing, *before the infinite play of the world (the world as function) is traversed, intersected, stopped, plasticized by some singular system (Ideology, Genus, Criticism) which reduces the plurality of entrances, the opening of networks, the infinity of languages.'*

Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (1970)

Key ideas

A readerly text is one for which the meaning is closed and the role of the reader is passive.

A writerly text is one that is open and in which the reader is an active participant in

writing its meaning.

Reader response theory today

Reader response theory has been profoundly influential in cultural studies, in which the written text exists as part of a matrix of sources that the individual engages with. Events such as the Rushdie Affair exist in this context, where the meaning of *The Satanic Verses* was being produced in relation to a range of racist and Islamophobic discourses in Britain during the 1980s. By allowing the roles of individual interpretive communities to be heard in this manner, reader response theory has been integral to the ideas of political schools of criticism such as postcolonialism, feminism and queer theory. It also has an interesting relationship to new materialist theory, which, as I discuss in Chapter 15, considers the individual's engagement with the physical, material world. New materialism intersects with reader response theory by asking what in the physicality of the text itself shapes a reader's engagement. How, for example, does reading a book in electronic form rather than paper contribute to its overall meaning? How might the quality of the paper, the binding or even the very weight of a book change the reading experience? It is these complex questions about precisely how different readers come to different meanings that makes reader response theory such a rich source of discussion.