

A close-up, vertical view of the spines of several books in a library. The books are of various thicknesses and colors, mostly in shades of cream and light brown. The text on the spines is mostly illegible due to the angle and focus, but some words like 'first', 'legal', 'he', 'ing', 'th.', 'ing', 'pen', 'said', 'pare', 'ing', 'tute', and 'me' are visible. The lighting is soft, creating a warm, scholarly atmosphere.

Language, Culture and Literature 3: Reader-Centred Approaches

HPFY3015 Language and Culture

Introducing Reader-Centred Approaches

- Reader-centred approaches (or **reader-response criticism**) explore the different meanings a text can have when read by different people.
- They draw on the concerns and perspectives of the person reading, and include approaches that investigate texts from a variety of contemporary social, cultural and theoretical perspectives.
- Focused as they are on the activity of the reader (**Author – Text – Reader**), reader-centred approaches are often said to be concerned with the ‘**world *in front of the text***’.

The Birth of Reader-Response Criticism

- Reader-response criticism came to prominence in the 1960s-70s and was a reaction against the text-centred approaches which had flourished in the 40s and 50s (so-called '**New Criticism**').
- The New Critics had emphasized that a literary work should be regarded as an autonomous and self-sufficient entity, one that has meaning built within it. In other words, they considered the meaning of a literary work to be objective, fixed, and to reside exclusively in the text itself.
- When it comes to what a text 'means', the New Critics insisted that all that is needed is the text itself. All other factors (e.g. the cultural or historical context of the author, the response of readers) should be discounted, for these would only lead the interpreter astray.

The Birth of Reader-Response Criticism

- The text-centred approach of the New Critics, however, gradually came to be viewed as inadequate.
- In the second half of the 20th century, there was an increasing awareness that literary compositions could not be sealed off from the historical and cultural contexts in which they were produced. Nor could they be studied in isolation from their readers.
- There was now a growing recognition that the role of the reader could not be ignored, and that readers should be regarded as active participants in the determination of literary meaning.
- Thus, as Wolfgang Iser argues, 'The study of a literary work should concern not only the actual text but also, and in equal measure, the actions involved in responding to that text' – Iser, 'The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach', p. 279

The Role of the Reader in Meaning-Making

- In reader-centred approaches, there is an emphasis on the reader's central role in the meaning-making process.
- In contrast to New Criticism, reader-centred approaches do not view meaning as being fixed or as 'locked inside the text'.
- Instead, meaning is understood to be something that is produced in the interaction between text and reader. A text has no meaning until it is read by a reader. Texts do not 'speak for themselves'.
- The features of the work itself—narrator, plot, characters, style, and structure—are less important than the interplay between a reader's experience and the text.

The Role of the Reader in Meaning-Making

- Readers bring their thoughts, knowledge, moods, experiences, assumptions, beliefs and values to the transactions between text and reader.
- What this means is that different readers can produce different readings or interpretations of the same text. A text can even mean different things to the same reader!
- This idea that multiple readings or meanings can be generated from the same text because of what each reader brings to that text is a central tenet of reader-response criticism.
- A text has no single ‘message’ but a series of different, even competing, messages, all of which are dependent on the individuals doing the reading.
- The question is no longer, ‘What does the text say?’ but ‘What does the text say to me/her/him/them?’

Questions to Ask

- The purpose of reader-response criticism, then, is to analyse the act of reading and to examine readers' responses to a text. The sorts of questions the reader-response critic might ask include:
 - ❖ *How might the reader understand the text, and interpret its images, based on his or her life experiences and/or social and cultural context?*
 - ❖ *How might the reader's relationship to the text depend upon cognitive development and personality?*
 - ❖ *To what extent can the reader's mood have an impact on a reading of the text?*
 - ❖ *In what ways can the reader's purpose for reading affect his or her response to the text?*
 - ❖ *How does the social context in which the reading occurs link the reader to a particular interpretive community (for example, a religious school or tradition)?*
 - ❖ *How might the ideologies that readers are invited to accept in the text match or mismatch with their own? Why might this be the case?*

Ideological Criticism

- Since reader-response criticism recognises the experiences a reader brings to a text, and emphasizes the social and cultural in meaning-making, it has led to the development of approaches that critique textual ideologies.
- That is to say, the practices generated by reader-centred approaches enable readers to examine (mis)matches between personal ideologies and those of the text.
- Key questions here include:
 - ❖ *What are the ways a text constructs or represents the world?*
 - ❖ *Which ideologies underpin this construction? Whose interests are served by the representations of the world in the text?*
 - ❖ *What are the political consequences of taking a particular view of the world as natural or preferred?*
 - ❖ *And, what awareness is to be gained by asking the question: Whose interests are served by these representations of the world in texts?*

Types of Ideological Criticism

- Analysis and critique of a text's ideology can be done through a number of different 'lenses'. These include (but are not limited to):
 - ❑ **Marxist criticism** – grounded in the economic and cultural theory of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Aims to explore or lay bare matters of class/power relations in a text.
 - ❑ **Feminist criticism** – seeks to examine the role of women and the relationships between the sexes in a text, with the aim of exposing and challenging the ideology of patriarchy.
 - ❑ **Postcolonial criticism** – attempts to isolate perspectives in literature that grow out of colonial rule and the colonizer-colonized mindset it creates.
 - ❑ **Ecocriticism** – investigates how nature and the natural world are imagined through literary texts, with the purpose of encouraging responsible attitudes towards issues of environmental sustainability and care.

Summary

- Reader-centred approaches examine the ways in which readers respond to, and interact with, literary texts.
- In contrast to earlier text-centred (and even author-centred) approaches, reader-response criticism emphasizes the role of the reader in assigning meaning to a text.
- It recognises that, since readers bring their own 'baggage' to a text, the same text can generate multiple readings or interpretations.
- Reader-response criticism also includes approaches that analyse and critique the ideology of texts.
- This ideological criticism can be done from a variety of social, cultural and theoretical perspectives (e.g. Marxist, feminist, postcolonial, ecological).