



Reader-Response Theory

Literary theory M2 - lit/civ

Lecturer: Ms. BENIA

**“ Text is just ink on a
page until a reader comes
along and gives it life”**

Louise Rosenblatt

Introduction

- Reader-Response Theory is a criticism that focuses on the readers' responses to literary texts. It is a broad and evolving domain of literary studies that can help us learn about reading processes. It emerged during the 1930s as a reaction against New Criticism, but became popular during the 1970s.
- A reader response analysis is often not an analysis of the text per se as much as it is an analysis of the reader's response.
- It is a divergent ground as it can encompass readings from other theories such as feminism, psychoanalysis, etc.

The transactional nature of reading

- In the process of reading, the text acts as a stimulus of feelings, associations, and memories that affect the reader's response and influence the ways in which readers make sense of the text.
- The process of reading a literary work is a **transaction** between the text and the reader.
- **Efferent Vs. Aesthetic reading** (Rosenblatt)
- **Determinate and indeterminate meaning** (Wolfgang Iser)
- The interplay between determinate and indeterminate meanings results in a number of reader responses: retrospection (thinking back), anticipation, fulfilment or disappointment, revision of understanding and interpretations.

Debates on the Reader

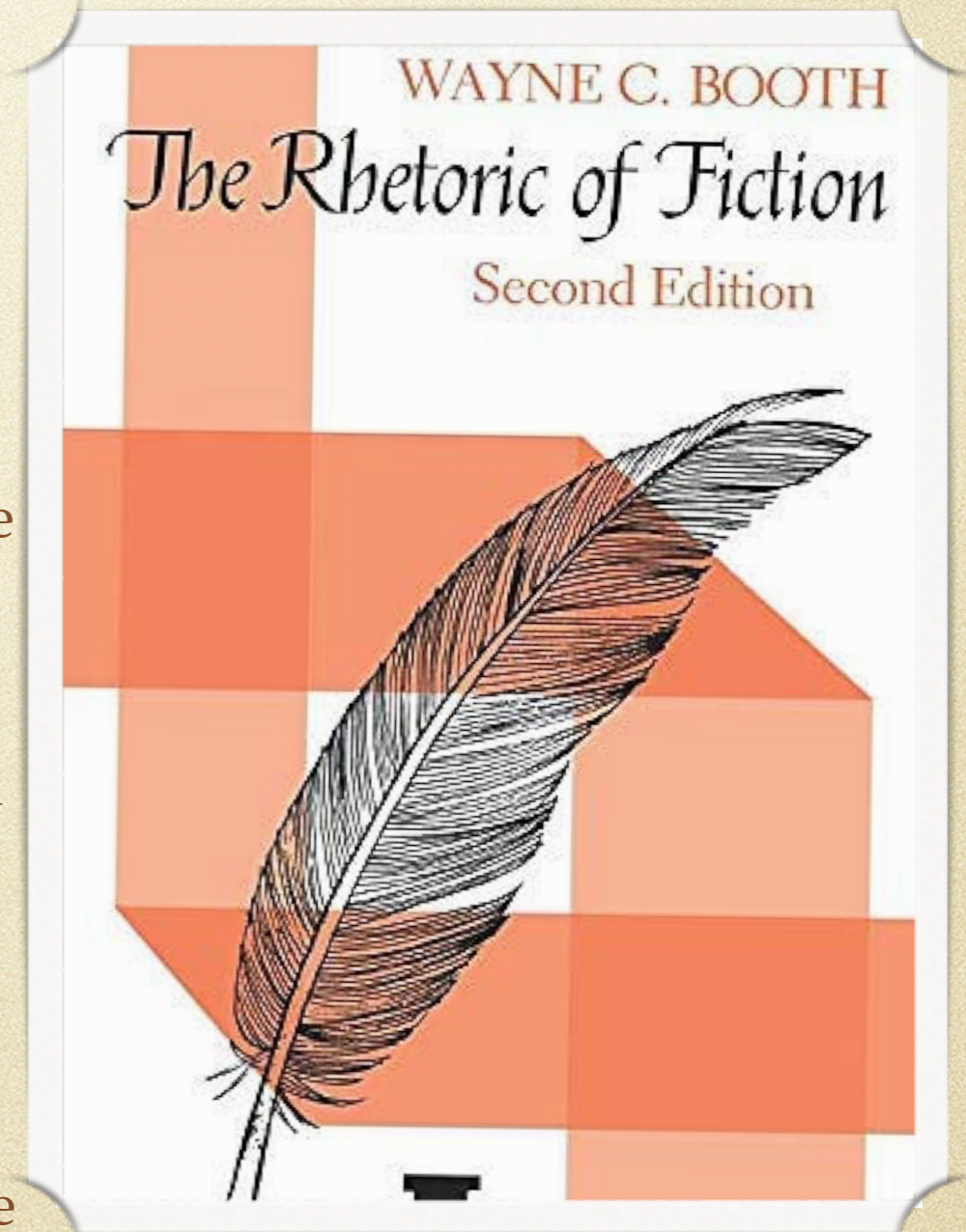
- The displacement of the audience from the centre of critical attention to its periphery is the result of Romanticism, which exalted the genius of the author above that of the critic.
- The return of the reader to the centre stage was encouraged by Wayne C. Booth with his work *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961).
- In the following decades, other definably different audience-centered criticisms emerged such as the works of Gerald Prince, Gérard Genette, Johnathan Culler, Umberto Eco, etc.
- Wayne C. Booth emphasises the way the text shapes the audience into “proper” readers. Susan Sontag believes there should be a mutual transparency of text and reader. Stanley Fish views the text as being created by the reader’s mental experience of it.

The Reader

- **Real Reader Vs. Hypothetical Reader** (quite often references to the reader are references to the critic analysing his/her documented reading experience of a specific text based on specific reader-response principles).
- **The Informed Reader:** (Stanley Fish's *Affective stylistics*): The reader who has attained the *literary competency* necessary to experience the text in its linguistic and literary complexity.
- **Implied Reader** (Wolfgang Iser): The reader that the text seems to be addressing. The characteristics of this reader can be deduced through the "apparent" attitude of the narrative toward the reader. (this means that particular texts who have an implied reader work differently in order to position readers in a way that guides their interpretation.)

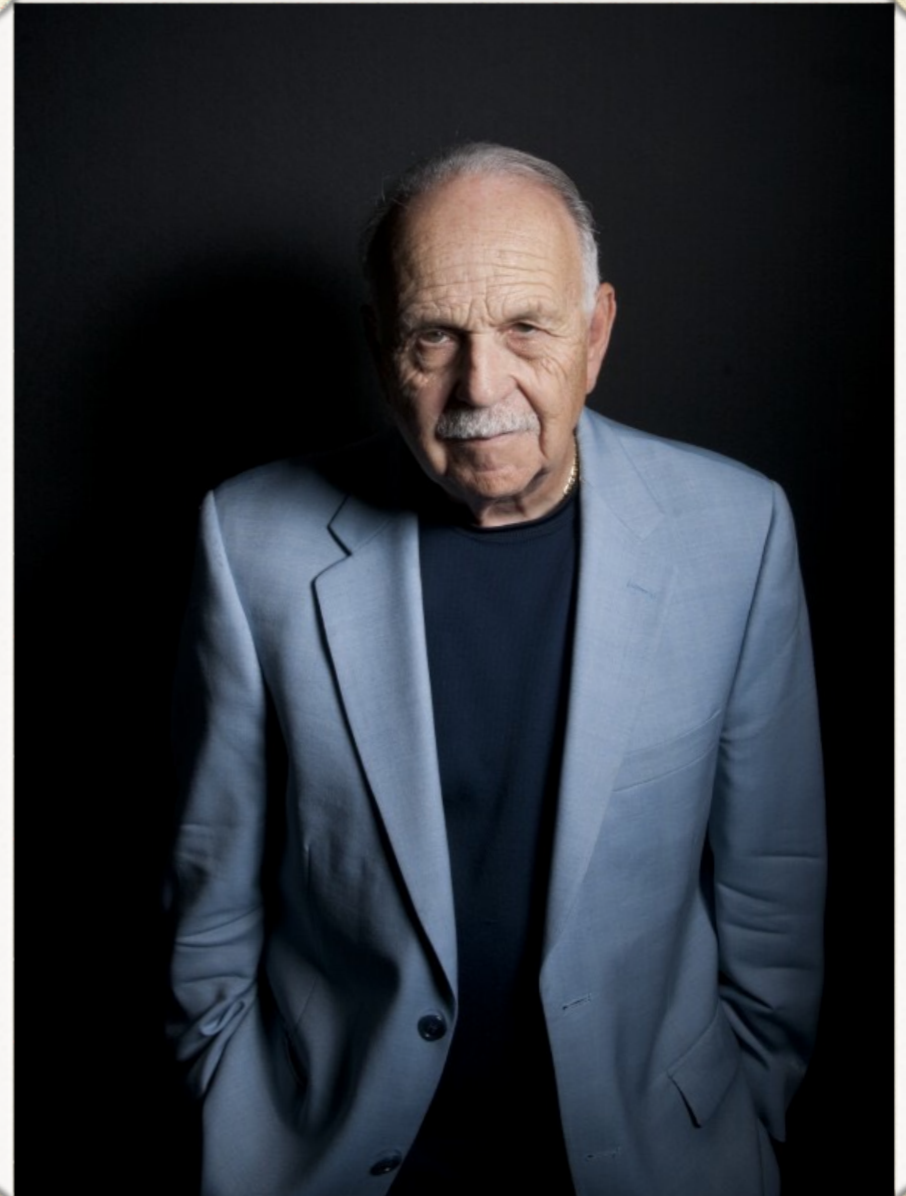
Wayne C. Booth

- Booth's work criticised the prevailing doctrines which valorised realistic stories told through "natural" objective narrative technique that avoided authorial commentary.
- His book showcased that such "natural" techniques are no less artificial and no less rhetorical than direct address of the reader.
- The reader's emotional distance from the characters depends on the distance created by the narrative techniques.
- Booth's work had an immense influence both in the development of theory and the literary canon of fiction. His terminology such as "implied writer" and "unreliable narrator" have become the standard vocabulary in fiction courses.
- Booth views readers as being constructed by authors, Rabinowitz hopes readers become aware of the ways in which their culture manipulates the rules of reading (cultural programming).



Stanley Fish and the Reader

- Fish believes that the text is completely malleable, and that the reader has the power to interrogate and question the text however he/she wishes.
- Fish advocated a method of interpretation that he called “Affective Stylistics” which requires a close reading of the text (Like New Criticism), and attention to the shifts in position and direction.



Jacobs — Rosenbaum
Levin
Thorne
Hayes
Ohman (?)

“How to Recognise a Poem when You See One?”

Is There a Text in This Class? (1980) - Stanley Fish

- Fish locates the text within the reader rather than in the words on the page.
- Fish acknowledges that the text within the reader is unstable, but (like Derrida) the text as author's words is equally unstable.
- **Interpretive Communities:** have tacitly agreed to certain principles of textual interpretation, which authors must recognise as they write their poems/ plays/ novels.
- In "How to Recognise a Poem when You See One," Fish shows that readers can belong to different communities simultaneously,
- He concludes through the experiment that it is inevitable for students to read into the text more than it is required to do: Reading is never "just reading"; it is always "reading as", it always involves a construction of meaning by the reader in accordance with genre specific conventions of interpretation within a community.

- Fish argues that readers do not approach a text as isolated individuals but rather as members of interpretive communities, which are groups that share similar interpretive strategies, assumptions, and beliefs about how to read and understand a text.
- Members of a particular community tend to approach a text with similar expectations, assumptions, and interpretive frameworks.
- **Socially Constructed Meanings:** Fish contends that meaning is not inherent in the text itself but is socially constructed within interpretive communities.
- **Community-Bound Interpretation:** According to Fish, interpretations are not universal or objective; they are bound to specific interpretive communities.
- **Fluidity of Interpretive Communities:** Interpretive communities are not fixed or static; they can change over time. Individuals may belong to multiple communities, and the dynamics of interpretation can shift as people move between different groups or as interpretive strategies evolve.
- **Conflict and Agreement:** Fish acknowledges that interpretive communities may disagree about the meaning of a text, and such disagreements are not easily resolved by appealing to external standards. Interpretation is, in many ways, an ongoing process of negotiation within a community.
- **Literary Competence:** Fish introduces the concept of "literary competence," suggesting that individuals acquire the skills and knowledge necessary for interpretation through their participation in specific interpretive communities. Competence is socially constructed and context-dependent.
- **Application to Legal Interpretation:** In addition to literature, Fish has extended the concept of interpretive communities to legal interpretation. He argues that legal interpretations are similarly shaped by the shared beliefs, values, and interpretive strategies of the legal community.

Affective Stylistics

Affective stylistics is a literary analysis approach that focuses on the **emotional impact of language** and stylistic choices within a text. It explores how linguistic elements such as **tone, diction, and syntax** contribute to **the reader's emotional response and engagement** with the content.



- Affective Stylistics argues that a literary text comes into being as it is read. it is an event in time rather a fixed object that exists in space.
- The text is examined closely (often word by word), in order to understand *how* (Stylistics) it *affects* (affective) the reader in the process of reading.
- It is an a cognitive analysis of the mental processes produced by specific elements in the text (mapping the patterns by which texts structure the reader's response while reading it.)
- The meaning of the text consists of our experience of what *does* the text does to us while we read it.
- Affective Stylistics uses thematic evidence to demonstrate the role played by the text in establishing the reading experience.

The Psychology and Sociology of the Audience

“Through the medium of words, the text brings into the reader’s consciousness certain concepts, certain sensuous experiences, certain images of things, people, actions, and scenes... 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”

**- Louise Rosenblatt - Literature
as Exploration**



Reader- Response Theory

"Books do not simply
happen to people.
People also happen to
books."

-Louise Rosenblatt

- **The Actual Reader:** The unpredictable and individual reader with his/her genuine but subjective response to the text.
- Each reading of a text is different because, even by a single individual, not because the text is inexhaustible but because the reader is a different person with each reading.
- A reader's response to the text should be on what is in the text. She warns that "an undistorted vision of the work of art requires a consciousness one's own preconceptions and prejudices"
- **Norman Holland:** "Unity Identity Text Self": Holland argues that "any individual shapes the materials the literary works offers him...to give him what he characteristically both wishes and fears, and...he also constructs his characteristic way of achieving what he wishes and defeating what he fears"
- The identity theme that determines the individual's repertoire of fantasies and defence mechanisms remains constant over time and influences the reader's response (an undistorted vision is difficult to achieve).

- David Bleich places the experience of reading in a social setting (mainly the classroom), where knowledge about life and art are acquired.
- Within the social setting of the classroom, the private response is “negotiated” into meaningful knowledge via the individual’s sense of the group’s purposes.
- **Sociology of literature:** How individuals and groups within social settings actually read texts.
- **The Resisting reader:** Judith Fetterley defines the concept of the resisting reader as one who actively challenges and questions the dominant cultural ideologies present in literature.

Reader-Response Questions

- How does the interaction between the text and the reader create meaning?
 - How do your ideological and psychological projections affect your reading of the text?
- How does a line-by-line analysis of a poem/text structure the reader's response?
- How do the interactions of the characters in the story mirror the readers' experience of decoding the meaning of the narrative?