Reader Response
Criticism: Tyson
Chapter 6
Summary

• “…the ultimate goal of reader-response criticism is to increase our understanding of the reading process by investigating the activities in which readers engage and the effects of those activities on their interpretations.” (188)

• Contrary to popular belief, reader-response criticism is not an anything goes theory; instead it is a theory that uses specific tools that help us analyze our response and the response of others.

• You may partake in reader-response criticism even when you do not realize that you are, because “any time an essay analyzes the act of reading or readers’ responses, one could classify that essay as reader-response criticism” (169).

Reader response theorists believe that readers actively make meanings as they read and that the reader’s role is important when understanding literature. They also believe that a written text is an event that only occurs within the reader.
According to Tyson, reader-response criticism can be divided into the following five categories:

- **Transactional reader-response theory**, which is often associated with the work of Louise Rosenblatt, analyzes the transaction between the text and reader. According to Rosenblatt, in order for this transaction to occur, we must read in the aesthetic mode, which allows for us to develop a personal relationship to the text that encourages judgments and focuses our attention on “the emotional subtleties of its language” (173). Wolfgang Iser believes that in order to interpret a text, one must use the text itself as a guide.
Affective stylistics theory

- Affective stylistics is the “slow-motion, phrase by phrase analysis of how the text structures the reader’s response” (175). It is used to understand how the text, which does not have a fixed meaning, affects the reader in the process of reading. Stanley Fish thinks it is important to ask the question “What does the sentence do to the reader?” in order to determine what the text does. Affective stylistic critics show how the reader’s experience is mirrored in descriptions and experiences in the text.
Subjective reader-response theory

Subjective reader-response theorists believe that readers’ responses are the text. In other words, the text is the written responses of readers. David Bleich believes that when we interpret the meaning of the text “we are interpreting the meaning of the conceptual experience we created in response to the text” (178).
Psychological reader-response theory focuses not on what readers’ interpretations say about the text, but on what those interpretations say about themselves. Norman Holland believes that we use the same psychological responses when reacting to events in our everyday lives and when reacting to literary texts. Therefore, the goal of interpretation is to fulfill our psychological needs and desires and to restore our psychological equilibrium.

This interpretive process consists of three stages: (1) defense mode, in which psychological defenses are raised, (2) fantasy mode, in which we interpret the text in a way to tranquilize those defenses, and (3) transformation mode, in which we focus on an intellectual interpretation to avoid an emotional response.
Social reader-response theorists, such as Stanley Fish, argue that all individual subjective responses are products of the interpretive community to which we belong. These interpretive communities are dynamic and determine how we will read the text in the first place. With social reader-response theory, “each interpretation will simply find whatever its interpretive strategies put there” (186).
Key terms and concepts

- Reader Response criticism does not mean that all reader criticism is correct.

- Readers actively make meaning out of text depending on who the reader is. Two readers could read the same book and get two distinct meanings out of the text depending on their social backgrounds, life experiences, and intellectual communities.
The Five headings of Reader Response Theory:

- **Transactional:** (Louise Rosenblatt) Analyzes the transaction between text and reader. Texts act as a stimulus to our responses to what we are reading. Texts also act as a blueprint that keeps us on track to what we are reading so we do not steer too far away from the actual meaning with what we are interpreting.
  
  - a. **Efferent reading:** Just focusing on the information that we read in the text. The reader only focuses on the facts and ideas.
  
  - b. **Aesthetic reading:** We focus on the emotional connections that we make to the characters and story lines in the text, we begin to make judgments and put ourselves in the place of the characters.
  
  - c. **Determinate meaning:** Facts that are given to the reader such as: physical character descriptions, dates, names, and certain events in the plot.
  
  - d. **Indeterminate meaning:** These are spaces in the text that are up for interpretation. Certain events are actions can have many different meanings, these gaps allows the reader to be creative and allow them to create their own interpretation.
Affective Stylistics

- Texts are examined very closely to determine the meaning and how it affects the reader in the process of reading. Stanley Fish describes stylistics as the structure of the reader’s response as it occurs from moment to moment, not the structure of the text as we might assemble it (pg 175). Stylistics does not ask, “What does the sentence say or mean,” but asks, “What does the sentence do to the reader or how does the reader of this sentence make meaning” (pg 176).
(David Bleich) This theory claims that readers’ responses are the text and there is no literary meaning beyond what the reader infers. Less about the text on the page and more about the text in our mind.

- a. **Real Objects**: Physical objects such as the printed pages of a text.
- b. **Symbolic objects**: The experience created when someone reads those printed pages, much like language itself.
- c. **Symbolization**: The feelings, associations, and memories that occur as we read a text.
- d. **Resymbolization**: Interpreting the meaning of the conceptual experience we created in response to the text, as well as our evaluation of the text’s quality.
(Norman Holland) Our reaction to texts is heavily influenced by the same psychological responses we bring to events in our daily lives. Texts have the ability to tap into the reader’s unconscious which makes the reader dislike or like a text.

- **a. Interpretation:** The way a reader conceptualizes a text to restore psychological equilibrium.
- **b. Identity theme:** The patterns of our psychological conflicts and coping strategies. Through this we unconsciously recreate the text for a world that exists more realistically to us.
- **c. Defense Mode:** Our unconscious defenses are raised by a certain character or event in a text.
- **d. Fantasy Mode:** We start to interpret the text in a way that gives us a psychological equilibrium, such as, we start to tell ourselves this isn’t a real story.
- **e. Transformation Mode:** The readers decides to focus on a more intellectual interpretation of the text in order to avoid the sometimes painful emotional responses.
(Stanley fish) There is no such thing as individual subjective response. Our responses to a text are largely tied to the interpretive community to which we belong. The reader has instilled interpretive strategies from various institutions (high school, University, churches) and these strategies shape what the reader defines as literary text. The reader can change interpretive communities at different times in their lives. Interpretive communities have a significant impact on how a singular reader reads a text.

- a. “Its point is that no interpretation, and therefore no form of literary criticism, can claim to reveal what’s in a text” (pg 186).

**Informed reader:** The reader who has attained the literary competence necessary to experience the text the way the author does.

**Implied reader:** The reader that the text seems to be addressing. The implied reader varies greatly from genre to genre.
Understanding Affective Stylistics: Northeastern Illinois University-Chicago Describes affective reader response as his or her emotional response to the text. Also emphasizes the fact that reader-response isn’t just personal opinion about the text, but takes into account groups of readers and the social constructs that cause a particular reaction.

University of Toronto: Affective Straightforward definition with attribution to Stanley Fish that calls affective stylistics “created in part by the interpretive strategy that the reader deploys.”

Subjective reader-response theory: New York College of New Rochelle: Reader-response Criticism Defines subjective reader-response criticism as how readers interpret text, rather than focusing on the author or analysis of cues from the text. This website also supplies three additional links related to Reader-Response criticism that may help you further define key terms.
The Author, the Text, and the Reader Discusses various points of view that can be common in readers, and emphasizes the role of language in creating meaning. Also, importantly, describes how a reader’s response is affected by his/her own perception of the world: “However subjective a reader's response is to the text, it is the continuous shaping of the events of the reader's mental process that slowly adjusts the thoughts to finally reach an understanding of the actual meaning of the text.”

Psychological reader-response theory: Google Books “Let the Reader Understand: Reader-response Criticism and the Gospel of Mark.” This book can be found from Google or the library, and discusses the experience of the reader including empirical study of reading (how psychological mindset affects reader’s interpretation, developmental psychology, etc).