

Introduction to Literary Theory
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Lecture – 14
Reader Response Theory: The Phenomenological Tradition

Hello friends and welcome back again to this series of lectures on Literary Theory. Now so, far in this series we have; organized our discussions of various theorists chronologically. So, we have started with ancient Greek theorists like Plato and Aristotle and then we have slowly worked our way through the literary theories of 18th and 19th century.

However, in our study of 20th century literary theories we will have to break away from this chronological progression. And we will have to do this break away from the chronological progression for two reasons primarily; the first reason is that in the 20th century we see a plethora of literary theories emerging from within the academia. And they emerge almost simultaneously and they run their course parallel to each other. And in most cases these are overlapping theoretical trends with the same academician or the same scholar representing more than one category of literary theory.

So, for instance Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak whose works we will encounter later in this series is generally considered to be one of the most iconic figures within the field of post colonial theory. But, at the same time Spivak is also one of the leading figures within the fields of contemporary feminist theory, as well as contemporary Marxist literary theory. This then makes a neat chronological categorization of literary theories and literary theorists more and more impossible as we approach the 20th century.

Neat categorizations are also made difficult by theorist like a Rolla Barth for instance who starts off his career as a structuralist critic and then takes a post structuralist turn later on in his life. So, there is a lot of overlapping and interconnectedness that we will have to deal with and given the circumstances a chronological journey through the field of literary theory would be a difficult if not and altogether impossible proposition.

There is another point that I need to make here; which is that a chronological progression is also need difficult. Because of the connections that one school of literary theory might

have with some earlier theoretical position. Let us for example, take the case of the reader response theory that we are going to focus on in this lecture as well as in the next one.

Now reader response as a literary theory gained prominence within western academia only during the last quarter of the 20th century. But its roots can be traced back to the more general theoretical position established by the phenomenological school of thoughts established during the first three decades of the 20th century.

Now, in order to understand reader response theory it is imperative that we also explore the philosophy of phenomenology and indeed that is precisely what we are going to do in today's lecture. But this going back though it is important as an aid to our learning nevertheless problematizes the chronological positioning of reader response theory within this course. So, it is better to clarify at this point that the sequence in which the various schools of 20th century literary theories are going to be taken up would be mostly a random.

I will of course, as always mention important dates of theoretical works as well as of the theoreticians to help you map them within specific historical contexts. But even then a certain degree of chronological arbitrariness in the arrangement of lectures would be unavoidable.

However, while pointing out the absence of a chronological sequence I would here like to suggest another form of categorization; which might help you navigate better through the thickly populated field of 20th century literary theory. If you look at the field of literary theory comprehensively as a whole you will perceive four different centers around which the various theoretical schools revolve.

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Four different centres around which the various theoretical schools revolve:

- Author
- Text
- Reader
- Context

These centers are firstly, the author secondly, the text thirdly, the reader and fourthly the context. So, in other words some theoretical positions prioritize the role of the author and focuses the critical lens on that particular author. And we have already encountered such author centric literary theory while studying romanticism for instance as well as the theory of creative genius.

If you remember this theory of creative genius was something that we discussed when talking about pseudo Longinus and his theory on the sub line. In the 20th century this particular focus on the author has become less prominent and it continues to remain less prominent even in the 21 century. And indeed much of the 20th century literary criticism emerges as a direct opposition to the author centric theories of the earlier period.

But, in spite of this is the focus on the author does not completely disappear with a coming of the 20th century literary theory. And we shall see for instance a significant role that author still place in psychoanalytic criticism for instance; which is a school of theory inspired by the work of Sigmund Freud.

So, now after having discussed author centric literary theories let us come to the second center which is the text. And the kind of 20th century literary theory that we have discussed so, far namely new criticism Russian formalism and even Bakhtinian dialogism, all of these theories are primarily text centric theoretical positions. So, their focus is on how a particular text uses different language components, to fulfill various

literary functions. And we will continue to observe this focus on the text or the language that is used as the text throughout our discussion on literary theories like structuralism for instance or even post structuralism.

On the other hand, what we will be discussing in this lecture and the next one will provide good examples of the reader centric literary theories. So, we have discussed author centric theories, we have already started discussing some examples of text centric theories and today we will take up a particular group of literary theory, which focuses on the reader. And then after this in the later part of this series when we started discussing Marxist literary theory for instance or feminist literary theory or post colonial literary theory.

We will be exploring what can be identified as the context centric schools of literary theory schools, which are focused on how social political and economic contexts guide the production as well as consumption of literature. Now though we have discussed these four centers around which the schools of literary theory they revolve, we have to remember that these distinctions are not watertight compartments and there is a significant degree of overlap.

Thus for instance do I have categorized Bakhtinian dialogism as a primarily centered on the text and on the language use within the text. You will remember from our discussion of Heteroglossia, that Bakhtin closely connected the study of language with the internal fragmentations that inform any particular socio cultural milieu. Also you will remember how his idea of carnivalesque for instance is deeply rooted within a specific historical context.

So, Bakhtin though primarily a text centered critic can also be analyzed as someone who is deeply interested in context. On the other hand, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak for instance who is closely associated with the context centric schools of theories like post colonialism Marxism, feminism, is nevertheless known for her emphasis on close reading and very careful and close attention to language use within a text.

And in this she closely follows one of her major intellectual mentors Paul de man who was himself a deconstructive critic and as I have just mentioned post structuralist schools like deconstruction are primarily text centric schools of theory.

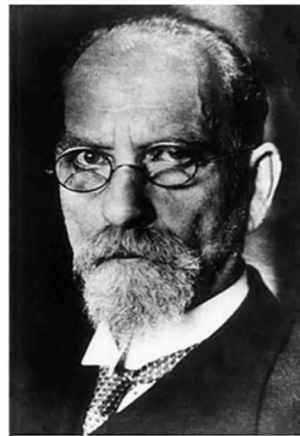
But nevertheless I think this categorization though it is not foolproof would nevertheless provide a rough schema that might help some of you to get a better grasp of the plethora that constitutes 20th century literary theory.

So, now, with this introduction in place let us move to today's topic which is reader response theory. And as I have already told you this is a particular form of literary theory which became popular in academic circles during the third quarter of the 20th century. But since it has deep connections with the 20th century a phenomenological school of thought we will start our discussion from there and we will do this by focusing on the work of the intellectual Edmund Husserl.

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Edmund Husserl
(1859 - 1938)

• "Pure Phenomenology: Its Method and Its Field of Investigation"



Source: Wikipedia

Husserl whose leads our 1859-1938 was born to a Jewish family in Moravia which was then a part of the Austrian empire and which is now a part of the Czech Republic, Husserl by training was a mathematician and also an astronomer.

But much like his contemporary and fellow Moravian Sigmund Freud Husserl is today known for opening up a distinct field of inquiry. So, whereas, Freud is regarded as the father of the discipline of psychoanalysis Husserl is credited for laying the foundations of the philosophical study of phenomenology. And it was in 1900 when Husserl was teaching at the University of Gottingen in Germany that he founded the phenomenological movement. And by the second decade of the 20th century he was successful in establishing the basic tenets of phenomenology as a separate field of study.

And one of the key texts of Husserl that we have from this particular period which was actually first delivered in the form of a lecture is titled pure phenomenology. And it has a subtitle which is it is method and its field of investigation. And why I refer to this text is because this text provides us with an interesting entry point into Husserl's work from the perspective of a student of literature and literary theory.

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"No object of the category "work of art" could occur in the objectivational world of any being who was devoid of all aesthetic sensibility, who was, so to speak, aesthetically blind."

("Pure Phenomenology", Husserl)

So, in the middle of this short piece Husserl states and I quote no object of the category work of art could occur in the objectivational world of any being who was devoid of all aesthetic sensibility. Who was so, to speak aesthetically blind in what follows my effort would be to elaborate on this sentence in a manner that will help to clarify not only some of the basic tenets of Husserl's phenomenological perspective, but also how his phenomenology directs us to a reader oriented theory of literature.

Now one of the important words that we need to elaborate from the quoted sentence is a word object and its derivative form objectivational. So, when we think of an object or speak of an object in our mundane conversation we are usually speaking of things that we believe are out there in the real world.

Say for instance a pen or a table for instance or a toothpaste tube these will all be considered as objects in our day to day conversation, but seen from the phenomenological perspective the situation will look slightly different.

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A phenomenologist will argue that we become aware of an object only when it appears in our consciousness.

A phenomenologist will argue that we become aware of an object only when it appears in our consciousness. That is to say that when I refer to a pen as an object, then what I am actually referring to is my consciousness of an object and not to any real thing situated out there beyond the realms of my consciousness.

The phenomenologist here is actually playing with a distinction that is quite old within the western philosophical tradition, which is the distinction between reality and how reality appears to us how we perceive reality and this distinction within the tradition of western philosophy is usually phrased as a distinction between noumenon and phenomenon.

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A **noumenon** is a thing that exists independent of human perceptions and human senses.

So, what is the noumenon because phenomenon is still a very commonly known term, but noumenon not so much so, what is it? Well noumenon is a thing that exists independently of human perceptions and human senses. And phenomenon is the exact opposite; it is how this thing which exists independently might appear to human perception in human senses.

Now, this distinction between noumenon and phenomenon can be traced back in western philosophical tradition at least as far back as Plato. And if you remember our lectures on Plato you will know how we had discussed the concept of platonic ideas in them. So, these ideas according to Plato existed above and beyond the realm of mundane human perception. And were indeed the true form of everything, phenomenon was how this idea manifested in the world that was perceivable by the human senses.

So, in Plato's scheme of things the idea of a bed will be noumenon because, it as an idea it exists beyond the realm of human consciousness and how the bed is perceived through human senses in its material manifestation would be phenomenon. So, platonic ideas are noumenon their material manifestation for Plato would be phenomenon, because that is how we perceive those ideal forms.

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Immanuel Kant
(1724 – 1804)



Source: Wikipedia

Now, by the time we reach Immanuel Kant who is the famous 18th century German philosopher. The distinction between noumenon and phenomenon gets changed slightly and in fact, it becomes more easy to grasp. So, with Kant phenomenon still signifies a thing as it appears to the human consciousness when grasped by human senses, but noumenon no longer signifies a platonic idea, but rather it signifies more simply what Kant calls the thing in itself, this is actually not very difficult to understand take for example, a stone.

Now following the reality appearance distinction one can see that a stone has two aspects, the first aspect is it is existence as a thing in itself beyond the realm of human perception. And the second is it is existence as an appearance within human cognition. So, in its first aspect as a thing in itself it will be noumenon and in its second aspect as an appearance that is perceived by the human cognitive process it is a phenomenon.

Now, according to phenomenologist the existence of an object, as a thing in itself is of little consequence, because in that form it is not available to the human consciousness, it is not available to the human cognitive processes. And since it is beyond human consciousness there is no way that it can be consciously known or explored or even validated as something that really exists or not objects from a phenomenological perspective is therefore, only the phenomenon and not the noumenon why? Because the

former can be known and therefore, it can be explored and it can be validated whereas, the latter one noumenon one can never be sure of what it is and whether it exists or not.

So, if you go back to the sentence that, I originally quoted from Husserl you will see that the phrase objectivational world of any being means the world of objects as phenomena which is within the grasp of our consciousness. However, before we move on with the quoted sentence, I want to clarify something else regarding phenomenon.

Now when I say that phenomenon is how a thing appears to the consciousness it is always assumed that phenomenon is a reflection it is a reflection of a noumenon that exists as a thing in itself. However, let us say that I am hallucinating for instance and let us say that I see a dagger in front of me just like Shakespeares Macbeth saw before him in act 2 scene one of the play.

Now that dagger which I see in my hallucination will not correspond to a thing that exists in the material world beyond my consciousness of course, because I am hallucinating, I am thinking of it in my own head. But from a phenomenological perspective the hallucinatory dagger is very much an object because; it is part of the objectivational world of a being.

To give you another example if I think of a dragon for instance, while writing a sequel to I do not know harry potter. And then, irrespective of whether or not there is a nominal dragon existing somewhere out there the dragon exists as a valid phenomenal object within my consciousness.

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Whether or not something is an object is not determined by its relation to a noumenal world out there, but rather it is determined by the notion of what the phenomenologists call "intentionality".

So, whether or not something is an object or not is not determined at least from the phenomenological point of view by its relation to the noumenal world. But rather it is determined by the notion of what the phenomenologist will say intentionality. And now this word intentionality is very important for a proper understanding of phenomenology and also literary theories based on the phenomenological philosophy.

So, let us try and have a more detailed look at this word. The word intentionality as used within phenomenology does not really mean what we usually understand by the word in our everyday conversation. So, for instance in our mundane conversation we speak of someone having a good intention, someone having a bad intention, whether word intention means something like the desire to achieve a particular purpose.

Now, for a phenomenologist like Husserl for instance intentionality has a different meaning, because according to Husserl every thought that we can think of is a thought of something. In other words our thoughts are always targeted towards some object or the other.

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Our thoughts are always targeted towards some object or the other. This targetedness of thoughts to particular contents or objects is what is identified as **intentionality** by the phenomenologists.

And here I use the word object in the more specific phenomenological sense of the term. And this targetedness of thoughts to particular contents or particular objects is what is identified as intentionality by the phenomenologists.

So, in other words if my thoughts are intended towards any particular content or towards any particular object then, irrespective of whether they exist out there as a reality is of no consequence to a phenomenologist. If it exists in my consciousness then the phenomenologist will treat it as a valid object. So, here we come across a question are these objects towards which our thoughts are guided by intentionality really reflections of something else that exists beyond those intentional thoughts or are the creations of our own consciousness?

And here I am not talking about things like dragons or hallucinatory daggers where one can say that more they do not exist they only exist in our mind. But what about more mundane things like pen or stone what we have is consciousness of these objects, but do they really exist as a thing out there. So, in more radical terms can we be at all certain of the existence of a world of objects beyond our consciousness can we really be certain of anything existing as a thing in itself.

Now, a phenomenological answer to this question will neither be a definite yes or a definite no, rather the argument will be that since we cannot know of this world because, we can only know through our sense perceptions our consciousness and we cannot know

if anything exists as a material reality beyond that consciousness. So, a phenomenologist would argue that since we cannot move of this world beyond our consciousness, we need to suspend our judgment about it.

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Since we cannot know of this world beyond our consciousness, we need to suspend our judgement about it. This is what is referred to as the “**phenomenological epoché**”.

And this is what is referred to as a phenomenological epoche, this suspension of judgment about a material world or a world outside what we are able to perceive and what we are conscious of. So, to repeat a world beyond the realms of our consciousness is not the field of investigation for a phenomenologist, rather this is how Husserl defines the phenomenological field of investigation.

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“It would be the task of phenomenology, [...], to investigate how something perceived, something remembered, something phantasied, something pictorially represented, something symbolized looks as such, i.e., to investigate how it looks by virtue of that bestowal of sense and of characteristics which is carried out intrinsically by the perceiving, the remembering, the phantasizing the pictorial representing, etc., itself.”

(“Pure Phenomenology”, Husserl)

And I will now read out from Husserl and though the language might sound slightly difficult, but I think after our discussion you will be able to grasp this properly. It would be the task of phenomenology to investigate how something perceived, something remembered, something fantasy, something pictorially represented, something symbolized looks as such, that is to investigate how it looks by the virtue of that bestowal of sense and of characteristics, which is carried out intrinsically by the perceiving, the remembering the fantasizing the pictorial representing, etcetera itself.

In other words phenomenology deals with the act of perception and not with any material reality or even in material reality that might exist beyond that realm of human perception. So, the question is how does this phenomenological inquiry into the way things are perceived, influence the way we theorize about literature. Now if you notice carefully you will observe that the phenomenological perspective is in sharp contrast to the position adopted by the 20th century literary theories that we have discussed so far.

Thus be it new criticism or be it Russian formalism, we have seen a prioritizing of literature as it exists as a text out there in the form of black words on white page. In the language of this present lecture new critics and formalists consider literature as a text which is a thing in itself. But as we have seen a phenomenologist will argue that the thing in itself even if it exists phenomenologist will neither deny its existence nor accept its existence that is the phenomenological epoche.

But, irrespective of whether it exists or not the thing in itself cannot be a proper object of inquiry, because it is beyond the realms of human perception therefore, if we treat literature as a thing in itself as a text, which is out there then that itself cannot be an object of inquiry because, it is beyond the realms of human perception. Thus from the phenomenological perspective a literature of any kind or even an art of any kind could only be studied in the form of how it is perceived by the readers or by the viewers or by the listeners and how they are then processed from within her consciousness?.

So, in other words a literary theorist cannot study a novel per se, but can investigate only how a text becomes a novel through the bestowal of the readers perception and through the bestowal of her ability to make sense of the text. A novel or any form of literature opens itself up as a field of investigation only when it emerges as a literary object within the objectivational world of any being, that is to say when it is perceived and read by a person as a piece of prose fiction.

If a novel just exists out there and is never read or is never perceived and decoded as a piece of literary work, then from the phenomenological perspective it falls beyond the purview of literary theory and the best we can do is to suspend our judgment about it. And what is true or for a novel is true for all literature and indeed all art forms in general and this brings us back to the quoted sentence with which we had started. And I will quote it again and now you will see you have a far more better grasp of that sentence than you had before.

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("Pure Phenomenology", Husserl)

No object of the category work of art could occur in the objectivational world of any being who is devoid of all aesthetic sensibility who was so to speak aesthetically blind. So, now, we can see that a literary theory that emerges from this phenomenological tradition will foreground not the text nor even the author, but the reader and will foreground how the reader response to our text as and when it appears to her consciousness.

However, this study of the readers response was not to emerge as a major literary theory till much later during the last three decades of the 20th century. And we will take up and discuss the contours of this literary theory which became popular as a reader response theory in our next lecture.

Thank you.