

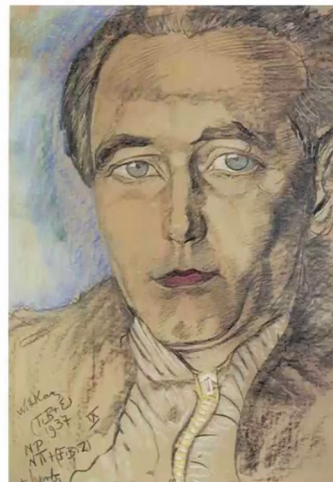
Introduction to Literary Theory
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Lecture - 15
Reader Response Theory: Wolfgang Iser, Harold Bloom, and Stanley Fish

Hello again and welcome back to another lecture on Literary Theory. Today, we are going to take forward our discussion on Reader Response Theory. And we are going to see how the phenomenological insights offered by Edmund Husserl, translates into literary criticism in the later part of the 20th century. And we will start our exploration with the works of Wolfgang Iser, but before we can start discussing Iser; we will have to trace back the story to the works of a polish theorist called Roman Ingarden. And we will have to do this because Ingarden works act as a sort of connecting bridge between the phenomenological theory of Husserl and the reader response theory of Iser.

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Roman Ingarden
(1893 -1970)



Source: Wikimedia Commons

So, first the dates Ingarden was born in 1893 and he died in 1970. And he was a student a direct student, in fact of Edmund Husserl at the Gottingen University where Husserl first came up with phenomenology and developed it as an independent field of inquiry. And Ingarden worked with Husserl's phenomenology and he worked towards building a framework of literary theory based on Husserl's philosophical insights.

So, if we try and understand in the most concise manner the basic features of this literary theory proposed by Ingarden; then we will arrive at three main points. And these three main points that I am talking about each of them follow from the other so they are connected points basically. The first point that can be used to sum up Ingarden's theory is based on the phenomenological concept of intentionality. Now as you will remember from our previous discussion on Husserl intentionality in phenomenology means the directedness or the targetedness of thought to one particular object or another.

Now, a piece of literature according to Ingarden is an expression of such an intentional act, which documents the directedness of the author's thoughts towards specific objects. So, literature documents this intentionality of the author from this first point follows the second point which is that these intentional acts are reanimated by the reader when she reads the particular work of literature. And in the process the reanimation allows her to direct her own thoughts towards certain objects. So, the first step is the author recording her intentionality in the form of a text, the second step is the reader reanimating that intentionality and allowing her thoughts to be directed towards certain objects.

But one of the things that Ingarden points out is that there is no perfect one to one correspondence between the authors coding in the piece of literature a certain set of intentional acts and the readers decoding of these intentional acts during the process of a reading. Ingarden argues that literary texts have indeterminacies which require the reader to fill them up with her own interpretations or with what Ingarden calls active reading. So, this is a third point that Ingarden makes and this active reading results in what he calls the concretization of literature concretization of a literary work.

So, in Ingarden's view literature is not a static object that is out there, but rather it is a dynamic process that emerges through a dialogue between the consciousness of the author and that of the reader and these two consciousnesses are mediated by a text. And it is on this particular understanding of how literature works that Wolfgang Iser goes on to construct his version of reader response theory. So, now, we are going to discuss Iser.

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Wolfgang Iser
(1926 - 2007)

- *The Implied Reader* (1972)
- *The Act of Reading* (1976)



Source: Michael Raine

Iser is known as the founding father of what is called the Konstanz school of criticism named after the German university the University of Konstanz. And his dates are 1926 to 2007 and among his publications there are two very important ones. The first one is a book title *The Implied Reader* which was published in 1972 and the second one is titled *The Act of Reading* which was published in 1976.

Now, one of the key features of how Iser conceived the act of reading literature was through the notion of what he called textual gaps. And these gaps I have already referred to them actually when discussing Ingarden as textual indeterminacies. But here let us try and understand because these gaps and indeterminacies form such a crucial part of the theorization of both Ingarden as well as Iser, who builds upon Ingarden theoretical insights. Let us try and understand these gaps in more details.

Well these gaps as I have already told you are textual indeterminacies which produce which sort of disrupt a sense of coherent progression within a text right. And this disruption of the coherent progression of the text while you are reading it can be produced for various reasons. In today's lecture we will consider three very typical reasons, why textual gaps or textual indeterminacies might be experienced by the reader; which might disrupt her understanding of the text or her understanding of the flow of the text. So, the first reason why a textual gap may be produced is because there is

disconnection between the various textual segments. To understand this let us take for instance a poem by Coleridge called Kubla Khan.

Now, as Coleridge himself mentions; the first two sections of the poem was conceived by him in an opium induced dream state, but the last section was written after the state of reverie was broken by the arrival of a visitor. And the sections of the poem Kubla Khan very distinctly carry the mark of this break in the mental state of the poet, which the reader needs to negotiate through her reading. But even if we do not take an extreme example like Kubla Khan, where the break is very clear and even the author points out that break. We nevertheless encounter in any literary text, gaps or breaks in the textual segments in the form of stanzas for instance; one stanza giving way to another stanza and there is a break in between we have paragraphs for instance which are separated by a break we have chapters which are again separated by a break.

So, they are separate textual segments and they produce gaps within the text and the passage between each of these schematic sections between stanzas, paragraphs, chapters present indeterminacies in the narrative coherence which requires the reader to do what Iser calls ideation and what Ingarden calls active reading. Take for instance John Keats his poem To Autumn a very famous poem each of the stanzas in the poem though connected by the autumnal theme are nevertheless distinct from one another for instance if you ask this question, what is the connection between the autumnal scene of plenty as described in the first stanza?

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“on a half-reap'd furrow sound asleep, [...] while thy hook
Spare the next swath and all its twined flowers”?

(“To Autumn”, John Keats)

And the figure in the second stanza about whom the poem says “on a half reaped furrow sound asleep, while thy hook spares the next swath and all its twined flowers”? We often infer that this figure in the second stanza, is the season of autumn incarnate, but the figure can as easily be interpreted as the representative of the approaching winter which will take away the plenitude of autumn. And indeed this latter interpretation gains even more heft, if we are conscious of the traditional poetic association between winter and death. And if we also note that the sleeping figure of the second stanza is carrying a moving hook or a side. And aside in western imagery is strongly connected with the figure of death.

So, the argument that I am trying to make here is that because the stanzas are not connected by any explicit commentary. In moving from one to the other we encounter interpretive uncertainties, we encounter textual gaps. And these gaps are then filled up by us the readers with our own imagination. Thereby producing literary experiences that are unique to one particular reader and that differs from a reader to another. Now let us come to the second reason, why a literary text might have gaps or indeterminacies; and I will call this reason the disconnection between narrative perspective take a Dostoevsky skinned novel for instance now as you will know from our discussion on Bakhtin.

Bakhtin has described these novels by Dostoevsky as characteristically polyphonic, which means that rather than having a unified authorial perspective it has a number of

different and often contradictory perspectives articulated by different characters. Thus the fictional world that we are exposed to is not unified and neither is it continuous. We as readers need to piece together these unmerged perspectives as so many different scraps of paper and we need to piece them together to create a kind of collage to arrive at a comprehensive understanding. And since that collage is indelibly stamped by our own interpretive acts as readers, the literary experience will differ from one reader to another.

And a good example of these gaps arising from different perspectives within a particular work, though it is not a piece of literature or novel is a film in fact and the title of the film is *Rashomon* it is a famous film directed by Akira Kurosawa. Where the same story is told from radically different perspectives and that forces the reader or in this case the viewer to idea it as Iser will call it. That is to put one's own imaginative input into that text so as to reach a sense of comprehensive understanding.

Now, the third reason why gaps textual gaps may be created has to do with the concept of reader; I am not talking about a specific individual I am here talking about the concept of the reader and how that concept is fragmented from within. So, when I say that the concept of the reader is fragmented what I refer to is a distinction between the implied reader and the actual reader. So, let us say that a literary text is written by an author with the assumption that it will be read by a white middle class woman. In other words our text is written with the white middle class woman as its implied reader.

Now, it is possible that the actual reader of the text that very text whose implied reader is a white middle class woman. The actual reader might be different might be different socially, might be different culturally, might be different historically. So, let us say if the implied reader of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* is a 19th century white British middle class heterosexual woman. Its actual reader might very well be a 21st century brown homosexual South Asian male and this distinction too creates areas of indeterminacy in a particular text.

This is because cultural terms or social relations, which might not have required much explanation to the implied reader; might present themselves as opaque to the actual reader thereby forcing him or her to fill in these opaque blanks in the narratives with his or her own interpretations. But now that we know that a text might have a number of gaps and might have them for different reasons, the question is; how do they affect the

reading and appreciation of literature? Well, as you might have noticed during my discussion on gaps and indeterminacies; I have repeatedly spoken about how they need to be filled up by the reader through ideation, if you want to use the word used by Iser also active reading which is the word used by Ingarden. And as far as Ingarden or Iser are concerned this process of filling up a particular text, is central to the very way we read and understand literature or indeed any text for that matter.

And according to them according to Iser and according to Ingarden a reader in spite of encountering a literary text that is essentially fragmented from within because of the number of gaps and indeterminacies that are there cannot reconcile herself to a fragmented reading and to a fragmented understanding of the piece, because reading should necessarily lead to the comprehension of a wholeness. That is one of their basic presumptions. So, they are saying even though a text might have indeterminacies a reading cannot sort of cope with indeterminacies or reading needs to fill up those gaps and resolve those indeterminacies to arrive at a whole comprehensive understanding.

So, let us go back to the example of Keats's *To Autumn* as we have discussed there is a gap separating the first and the second stanza where the connection between the scene of autumnal plenitude in the first stanza and the lonely figure in the second stanza is not quite established by the text. Yet as a reader we cannot just read them as two separate and distinct fragments within the same text. The moment we pass from the first to the second stanza we try and establish a connection between the two to reach a sense of wholeness a comprehensive understanding of the poem as a unified work right. We do not read Keats's poem as a collection of three completely separate and completely different stanzas. We try and combine them together to form a sense of wholeness and as Iser notes in his book the act of reading and I quote "consistency building is the indispensable basis for all acts of comprehension".

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Iser notes,

“consistency-building is the indispensable basis for all acts of comprehension”.

(The Act of Reading, Iser)

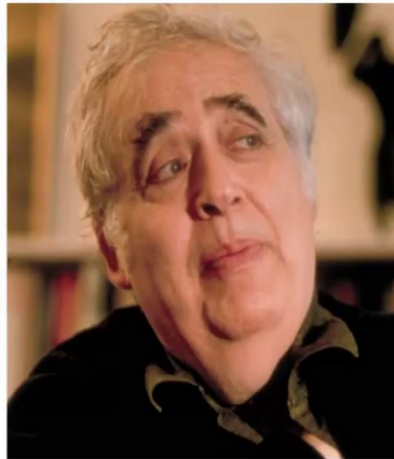
Now, this sense of a wholeness arrived at through active consistency building is of course, a dynamic process. And the reader needs to keep changing and adjusting it as she moves down the text. Thus for instance a reader moving from the second to the third stanza of *To Autumn* is exposed to one more textual segment which she needs to incorporate in her evolving sense of what the poem means as a whole. This in effect changes how the whole is comprehended by the reader. In other words through the reading process one idea of wholeness constantly gives way to another idea of wholeness and each of these depends upon the way a particular reader ideates or she fills the gaps that she encounters during the reading process.

Now, here we encounter a problem; which is that if a literary reading is so independent from other literary readings; which is to say that if a literary reading is so much pivoted on how individual readers interpret the gaps and tide over the indeterminacies through ideation. Then how can we even publicly refer to and discuss a particular literary piece. For instance if my reading of *Hamlet* is completely different from your reading of *Hamlet*, then how can we even talk about this one text called *Hamlet*. Well Iser admits that this problem of uncontrolled subjectivism does complicate the reader response theory, but we will also have to remember that the ideation by individual readers does not happen in an absolute vacuum.

A significant part of the reading experience involves being guided by the intentional acts of the author. So, there are certain limits of ideation during the reading process, beyond which an interpretation might be regarded as a misinterpretation. So, in other words irrespective of how you and I fill the gaps which are present within Shakespeare's Hamlet the text still provides sufficient common ground for me to refer to it to refer to Hamlet and for you to understand which text I am referring to. Now from Iser we would move to Stanley Fish, who is another major figure in this critical tradition but since I just mentioned the distinction between reading and misreading I would like to briefly touch on Harold Bloom's theory of Anxiety of Influence which casts a very interesting light on the concept of misreading.

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Harold Bloom
(Born - 1930)



Source: biography.com

Now, according to Bloom and by the way Bloom is a noted American literary critic. Who was born in 1930 and he is still with us. Bloom suggests that any poet or any literary artist finds her motivation to create new literature primarily by reading the works of earlier authors. However, according to Bloom the poet or the literary artist also wants to assert the individuality and uniqueness of her own work. And this she can only do by strongly denying the influence of the earlier author because otherwise it will seem like a copy of an earlier work.

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The oscillating response towards the previous authors by later authors is what Bloom terms the "**anxiety of influence**".

So, this oscillating response towards the previous author by later authors is what Bloom turns as the anxiety of influence. So, how does a poet or a novelist overcome this anxiety? According to Bloom the poet overcomes this anxiety of influence by distorting the work from which she has drawn to such an extent that nobody is able to recognize the influence or shadow of that previous work in her own poem or in her own novel. So, the trick lies in distorting the source of influence. This process of trying to resist the influence through distortion is what Bloom refers to as misreading.

So, what Bloom is effectively doing here is prioritizing misreading over reading. And Bloom argues that all readings because Bloom does not really believe in true readings as such according to Bloom all readings by subsequent poets of the works of previous poets or previous authors are necessarily misreadings, but some are weak misreadings. Where the degree to which the parent poem has been distorted remains less and therefore, the influence distinctly identifiable others are strong misreading where the influence of the parent poem has been so successfully resisted that the later work appears as almost original. So, Bloom's theory of originality is very interestingly tied up with notions of misreading.

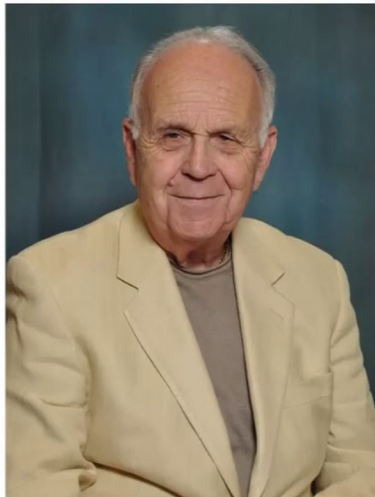
Now, my reference to Bloom in this lecture on reader response theory is important on two accounts. First I wanted to discuss Bloom because Bloom represents a section of reader response theorists which also include important personalities like David Blike for

instance whom I would not have time to discuss. But they represent a section within reader response theory who works with psychoanalytic insights. So, for instance underlying Blooms theory of anxiety of influence and misreading is a Freudian notion of oedipal complex. And this will become even more clearer when we discuss psychoanalytic literary theory in our future lectures.

But there is also a second reason why I thought discussing Bloom would be apt here, Which is that Bloom shows that reader response theory need not only concern itself with how we read or interpret texts, but we can also use it to gain insight into the creative process of literature or how a text is produced by the author. Now we finally, come to Stanley Fish, who is as I told you one of the most celebrated, but also one of the most controversial scholars working in the field of reader reception theory.

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Stanley Fish
(Born - 1938)



Source: FIU Law

Fish was born in 1938 in Rhode Island in America and he is currently a chair professor at the Yeshiva University in New York. Fish is primarily known for two very important theoretical concepts. The first is known as affective stylistics and the second is known as his concept of interpretive communities. So, let us start with the first one affective stylistics, refers to how reading of a text affects the readers and how these affects in turn shape the reading process itself. So, to explore this idea further we will first have to understand that for fish as for other reader response theorists Iser for instance. A text is

not a static entity located out there rather it is a dynamic process which unfolds over time as the reader proceeds through a particular text.

And this dynamism results from the fact that readers bring their own imagination, they bring their own sentiments, and expectations to the reading. And these keep changing as they progress through the text as a result their idea about what the text is also keeps changing during the course of their reading. So, as Fish note's the text is structured by the readers response to it and this structuring process unfolds temporally during the course of the readers reading. And Fish illustrates this structuring process gradual structuring process which builds up over time by referring to the following line written by Walter Pater.

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"This at least of flame-like, our life has, that it is but the concurrence, renewed from moment to moment, of forces parting sooner or later on their ways."

(Walter Pater)

This at least of flame like our life has that it is, but the concurrence renewed from moment to moment of forces parting sooner or later on their ways. Now as you can see that this line does not provide for a very easy reading and one of the reasons why it does not provide for an easy reading is because its flow is continuously disrupted by the intrusion of various segments. And this forces the reader to adjust her comprehension of the words accordingly. So, for instance the phrase concurrence of forces is disrupted by the intervention of the words renewed from moment to moment. And this forces the reader to work these words into her interpretation of the phrase concurrence of forces.

And then again as the reader reads along she has to modify her understanding of the word concurrence as she encounters the antithetical word parting. So, the idea that you gain by reading the word concurrence is balanced or you might even say disrupted by the appearance of the word parting as you read along the line. And again the sense of the word parting and the finality that it signifies gets modified and even suspended by the interplay of the following words sooner or later.

So, the moment you encounter the word parting you arrive at a sense of finality, but when you move on you encounter the words sooner or later which again delays the sense of parting or at least disrupts its finality. So, as you can see with this explanation a reader's interpretation of a text changes as she passes from one word to another word from one sentence to another sentence. And this process through which meaning builds up gradually in the mind of the reader is what is referred to by Fish as effective stylistics. Here however, we encounter the same problem that we encountered in Iser which is that if a text is so dependent on a reader's structuring of it through his or her expectations and imaginative interpretations. Then how can we even refer to a text which can be understood by everyone.

How can we refer to a text that can be commonly identified by a reading public at large? In studying Ingarden and Iser, we had found the answer to this question by referring back to the intentionality of the author inscribed in the text which acts as a guiding principle for the reader. In Fish the answer is to be sought in the author's intention in forming the text, but this answer gains a further nuance through the introduction of the concept of interpretive community. Now according to Fish the competent reader does not stray away from the intentions of the author even while structuring the text through his own interpretation. And this is because the author and the intended reader of a text belong to the same interpretive community which means that they share the same literary competence and they share the same cultural assumptions and expectations.

So, let us say that we are reading a play by Shakespeare for instance and we encounter a character which speaks some sentences in an aside right. Now while reading the play we do not consider the character to be a mad person who assumes that the lines he has spoken in an aside will not be heard by other characters on the stage even while the audience can hear them distinctly and we do not make this assumption because we share the literary competence that the author expects us to have so as to understand the

meaning that the author seeks to convey by noting that these lines are spoken as an aside. So, we understand the dramatic convention that is signaled by the introduction of the term aside. And the same is applicable when we read other texts as well where we try and decode the author's intention and we are aided in this process by belonging to the same interpretive community.

Now this notion of interpretive community therefore, makes the academia and the literary critics as well as theoreticians very important, because they are the ones who are identified as sharing the required competence to understand exactly what the author intended to mean. Now this idea of an interpretive community addresses the issue of unchecked subjectivism on the part of the reader, but it raises a different set of problems. So, for instance what if a reader does not belong to the interpretive community or even more importantly what if the reader is not in agreement with the author. To take an example, I for instance I am not a supporter of fascism neither do I share the cultural assumptions of a Nazi sympathizer.

So, what kind of a reader does that make me of a text like Hitler's mind come for instance? We will also see that for some schools of criticism this we will find out in our future lectures when we deal with post colonialism for instance where reading is a way of resisting the author's intention and not agreeing with it. So, how do these kinds of readings fit in with Fish's theories? We will get to revisit these issues in some of our future lectures. But with this we come to an end of our discussion on reader response theory. And we will carry forward our lecture series by starting to discuss structuralism from the next lecture onwards.

Thank you for listening.