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Kafka's Fictional Works from a Receptionist Perspective, a Study
of The Trial, The Castle and Amerika

A PhD in English Literature

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Preface

Reception Theory defines literature as the process of how the reader and the text interact with each other. Texts have more than one meaning, and different meanings are largely due to differences in the reader's hermeneutical stance or horizon of expectation. Roland Barthes' theory of the *Death of the Author* and the *Writerly Text* was one of the concepts which came out of Reception Theory. Barthes identifies what he sought in literature: openly-interpreted literary texts. "Readerly" and "writerly" are terms Barthes employs in S/Z both to delineate one type of literature from another and to implicitly interrogate ways of reading. A *Readerly text* is any text that has a definite solution, a text that can be satisfactorily finished. A *Writerly text* is a text that is not so easily closed off, one that postpones a solution, opposed by Barthes to the readerly text.

Reading is always a dialectical process, and reading Kafka eminently so. Kafka's writing received its meaning from reading, and not, as we would traditionally expect, the other way around. This is because Kafka's novels are open narratives whose final meanings can never be rounded off. Reading Kafka is a puzzling experience. Kafka's readers are forced to confront the process of making meaning and thus the reader is to continue the writer's work via bringing his work to the light of understanding. Kafka's writing is meaningless until it is deciphered, until it is brought into the framework of some categories which give it literal meaning. The assumption is that meaning is dependent on some accepted category of thought such as psychology, existential philosophy, policy or religion, etc. The result is various interpretations.

This study of Franz Kafka's fictional works seeks to explore how his fictional works can be described as openly-interpreted literary texts. The works chosen to investigate how Kafka's fictional works can be described as writerly texts are *Der Prozess* (The Trial, 1925); *Das Schloss* (The Castle, 1926); *Der*

Verschollene (Amerika or The Man Who Disappeared, 1927). These works have become subject to endless sifting and interpretation. Each one of these novels is unfathomable. Kafka's novels have forced their way into the modern consciousness. Kafka's work is so specific on the surface, and so cryptic underneath, that it can serve any interpreter.

Chapter One

Introduction

Reception Theory and Kafka's Narrative Vision

Reception theory is a version of *Reader Response Literary Theory* that emphasizes the role of the reader in the reception of a literary text. "Reception theory is the historical application of a form of *reader-response* theory that was proposed by Hans Robert Jauss in *Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory* [in *New Literary History*, Vol. 2, 1970-71]. Like other reader-response criticism, it focuses on the reader's reception of a text; its prime interest, however, is not on the response of a single reader at a given time, but on the altering responses, interpretive and evaluative, of the general reading public over the course of time. Jauss proposes that although a text has no 'objective meaning,' it does contain a variety of objectively describable features. The response of a particular reader, which constitutes for that reader the meaning and aesthetic qualities of a text, is the joint product of the reader's own 'horizon of expectations' and the confirmations, disappointments, refutations, and reformulations of these expectations when they are 'challenged' by the features of the text itself. Since the linguistic and aesthetic expectations of the population of readers change over the course of time, and since later readers and critics have access not only to the text but also to the published responses of earlier readers, there develops an evolving historical "tradition" of critical interpretations and evaluations of a given literary work" (Abrams's *Glossary of Literary Terms*, 262-3).

"More recently a number of American critics (e.g. Edward Said, Jonathan Culler and Stanley Fish) have become interested in 'reading communities' and institutions as determining forces in the reading of texts. Fish, for instance, holds that it is only within a given community or institution that the facts of literary study (i.e. genres, periods, authors, texts) are available, and that these 'facts' are as much a product of the community as they are of the interpreters. Fish contends that all

interpreters are extensions of communities. His collection of essays *Is There a Text in This Class?* (1980) is relevant" (Cuddon's *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms*, 733)

The revolutionary approach, represented by the influential writings on the theory of relativity by Albert Einstein (1879-1955) and the concept of "paradigm shift" by Thomas S. Kuhn (1922-1996), raises questions as to how one should approach the notion of "truth" and "fact", thus, suggesting the importance of interpretation. In addition, these two authors provided the foundation for Reception Theory which requires the notion of interpretation to be included in the process of literary experience (Kinoshita, 4). According to Michael Groden in *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism*, "Reader-response criticism can be traced as far back as Aristotle and Plato, both of whom based their critical arguments at least partly on literature's effect on the reader. It has more immediate sources in the writings of the French structuralists who stress the role of the perceiver as a maker of reality, the semioticians, and such American critics as Kenneth Burke, especially his *Psychology and Form* which defined 'form' in terms of the audience's appetite, Louise Rosenblatt, Walker Gibson and Wayne Booth. But reader criticism became recognized as a distinct critical movement only in the 1970s, when it found a particularly congenial political climate in the growing anti-authoritarianism (Groden, 606).

According to Chris Murray's *Encyclopedia of Literary Critics and Criticism*, "the term reader-response criticism refers not to a single theory or method but to a range of approaches in which the focus of critical attention is on how readers respond to a text. Its development was a reaction against New Criticism and other varieties of formalism, in which there is an emphasis on the *text*; and also against various biographical approaches to interpretation, in which the *author* is seen as the ultimate source of meaning (reader response criticism developed mainly during the 1970s and 1980s, when the concept 'death of the author,' announced by Roland

Barthes, was making an impact on critical theory). In their analysis of how a reader responds to a text, reader-response critics have drawn upon a number of theories and interpretative models, notably psychoanalysis, structuralism, and phenomenology" (920).

Chris Murray also pinpoints that Reception theory, *Rezeptionsästhetik* or the aesthetics of reception, also known as the Constance School of reception aesthetics, was introduced by its main proponents, Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser, at the University of Constance in Baden-Württemberg, Germany (formerly West Germany), shortly after this newly established center of educational reform was founded in 1967. Both Jauss and Iser attempted in different ways to shift critics' focus from the traditionally defined object of literary study, namely, from the author and his or her text, to studies of readers, readership, and the reading process. Like the practitioners of the broader school of reader-response theory, reception theorists are committed to reinstating the reader into the interpretive process by investigating the manner in which texts, readers, and society interact, and by analyzing the specific ways in which literary works are "received" both individually and collectively by their "consumers." This interpretive gesture constitutes a marked shift in German literary theory, away from critics' earlier fascination with individuals, mentalities, and formalistic concerns toward an appreciation of the constitutive role readers play in the creation of textual meaning (923-4). Murray indicates:

Reception theory reaches beyond the ancient notion of evaluating texts according to their effects on readers, as practiced much earlier by Aristotle and Plato, and incorporates premises from a variety of fields of inquiry, including aesthetics, semiotics, psychology, and philosophy... In particular," reception theory evolved in reaction to the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer, whose

Wahrheit und Methode (1960; *Truth and Method*, 1975) was published a few years earlier... For reception theorists, the reader's role in Reception or the activity of reading, includes not only the reader's response to the text, but also his or her contribution to the active construction of the text's meaning. (924)

Murray provides a clear picture of the political and cultural context in which reception theory originates saying:

Reception theory evolved to a large extent in response to (1) the pressing sociopolitical and anti-authoritarian political climate in Germany in the late 1960s, (2) the expanding popularity of Marxist thought at that time, (3) demands for greater social relevance of humanities disciplines at German universities, and (4) the philosophical rift within phenomenology accompanied by a general skepticism of the knowability of objects (924).

Jeremy Hawthorn indicates, in his *Glossary of Contemporary Literary Theory*, that Reception Theory is a term "generally used in a relatively narrow sense to describe a particular group of (mainly German) theorists concerned with the way in which literary WORKS are 'received' by their READERS over time, but also sometimes used in a looser sense to describe any attempt to theorize the ways in which art-works are received, individually and collectively, by their 'consumers'. The names most frequently mentioned as core members of the particular group of theorists are Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser (289).

John A. Cuddon also explicates, in his *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, that reception theory is "a school of literary theory which is

associated particularly with the University of Konstanz and the journal *Poetik and Hermeneutik* (published from 1964). One theorist, namely Hans Robert Jauss, is especially associated with the theory. He is concerned with the general response to literature in terms of reception-aesthetics rather than the individual's response, and he suggests that literary work should be studied in terms of the impression or impact it makes on its contemporary audience, and that literary value is judged according to how much the view of a text alters over time. "Aesthetic distance" is the term used by Jauss to denote the difference between the contemporary view of a work of art (at the time of its first publication) and the present-day view. But still the idea holds that the reader has a contribution to make in the process. So there is a kind of balance and co-operation between text and what it provides and what the reader contributes. However, all readers are different and therefore may be supposed to bring a different response to any text" (733)

The introduction of Jane Tompkins's anthology, *Reader-Response Criticism*, published in 1980, claims that Reader-Response Criticism "could be said to have started with I. A. Richards's discussions of emotional response in the 1920s or with the work of D. W. Harding and Louise Rosenblatt in the 1930s" (x). "Reader theory", "audience theory" and "Reception Theory" are perhaps the most common general terms for reader-response criticism. "Reception Theory" most accurately refers to the German school of *Rezeptionskritik* represented by Hans Robert Jauss. Reader-critics take the existence of the reader as a decisive component of any meaningful literary analysis, assuming, as Michael Riffaterre puts it, that "readers make the literary event" (116).

Reception theory was at its most influential during the 1970s and early 1980s in Germany and USA. This approach to textual analysis focuses on the scope for negotiation and opposition on the part of the audience. This means that a "text" - whether it is a book, a movie, or other creative work - is not simply passively accepted by the audience, but that the reader/viewer interprets the meanings of the

text based on their individual cultural background and life experiences. In essence, the meaning of a text is not inherent within the text itself, but is created within the relationship between the text and the reader. Therefore a basic acceptance of the meaning of a specific text tends to occur when a group of readers have a shared cultural background and interpret the text in similar ways. It is likely that the less shared heritage a reader has with the author/the artist, the less he/she will be able to recognize the author's/the artist's intended meaning, and it follows that if two readers have vastly different cultural and personal experiences, their reading of a text will vary greatly (Fortier, 132).

John F. A. Sawyer, in *The Blackwell Companion to the Bible and Culture*, states that the importance of reception in the analysis of literary texts was appreciated already in ancient Greece. Rhetoric is the art of persuasion and is very much concerned with the effect a text has on its readers. It refers to all those literary devices designed to get the reader or listener to respond to a text in various ways. It involves psychology as Plato saw when he warned against letting people read literature that might arouse in them emotions that are difficult to control. Aristotle too saw the psychological effect that literature can have on people, although in his analysis of the cathartic effect of Greek tragedy on audiences, the effect was more benign; they feel calmer, more relaxed and satisfied at the end of the evening. Nor is this emphasis on reception restricted to the study of literature. Businesses spend millions on consumer research to analyze the effect marketing strategies have on their customers. The success of films is measured by box office returns, and television programmes are judged by their share of the potential viewing public (280-81). Sawyer says:

So attention to the reception of a text is not new. What is new is the terminology. The term reception theory itself or *Rezeptionsaesthetik* goes back to the Sixties and to the Konstanz School of literary studies. It is more or less

the German equivalent of the preferred American term "Reader-Response Criticism" and is particularly associated with the name of Hans Robert Jauss whose book *Towards an Aesthetic of Reception* appeared in 1982. (283)

What is also new is the notion that the reception of a text is more important than the text itself, and even that a text doesn't really exist until somebody reads it. Sawyer says:

"The bare text is mute". It is like the philosophers' old question: If a tree falls in the forest and no-one hears it, does it make a sound? A text without a reader has no meaning. It is the readers of a text that give it meaning. In a sense the reader creates the text as much as the author does. The role of the reader as creator was a new concept. (283)

Jane Turner, in *The Dictionary of Art*, elucidates that Reception Theory as a term refers to a number of distinctive theoretical approaches with potential implications for the visual arts and their history. The notion of reception in general connotes a concern with the reaction or response to a work of art or literature and thus implies a shift in emphasis from the production or creation of the work, or from the writer or artist, to the perception or interpretation of the reader or beholder (61).

Accordingly, Reception Theory introduced the concept of reader involvement and how text and reader converge in a process of literary experience and meaning production. This paradigm shift was also apparent in visual art. Jane Turner states the following facts about what she calls "Visual Reception Theory":

The few writers who attempted a visual reception theory were inspired more by Iser than by Jauss. Michael

Bockemuhl, for instance, seems to represent a restatement of Iser's theses in claiming that the reception of an image can also be conceived as part of its production. The image does not merely consist in its material structure as placed before the eyes; it originates and comes to consciousness in a creative process involving the beholder: it lives only in the process of its being perceived (62).

Discussions of the visual arts have long drawn on these notions, especially in works of Minimalists, such as Carl Andre (1935-), Dan Flavin (1933-96) and Donald Judd (1928-94) (Meyer, 16). According to James Meyer, all of the artists associated with Minimalism rejected the idea that it was a coherent movement. However, Michael Archer says that the label "Minimalist" was applied by critics to the work of Donald Judd, Robert Morris, Dan Flavin, and Carl Andre because the key features of Minimalism are most easily recognizable in the art of these artists (Meyer, 16).

In Minimalism, the viewer was also considered to be a part of the process in order to complete the work. In addition, interpretations by the viewer and the presence of horizon of expectations played an important role in this artistic experience. The earliest statement concerned with Minimalism is Carl Andre's 1959 homage to painter Frank Stella, "*Preface to Stripe Painting*" which praises the artist's reduction of painting to its essential formal components (Meyer, 17). Andre believed that sculpture must prove itself as art in real space with the viewer, and he avoided the use of "framing devices such as the traditional pedestal" (Baker, 48).

Andre made a series of "floor sculptures," consisting of steel plates laid directly on the gallery floor (Meyer, 98). Andre uses a similar strategy of inviting the viewer in his series of steel plate works. For one of the pieces from the artist's steel plate sculptures, *144 Steel Square* (Figure 2: 1967), Andre suggests the

following: "You can stand in the middle of it [the work] and you can look straight out and you can't see that piece of sculpture at all because the limit of your peripheral downward vision is beyond the edge of the sculpture" (Meyer, 98). Both examples illustrate that the viewer is included in his work as "essence" and "the necessary condition of art" (Baker, 45-52).

Kenneth Baker, an art historian, suggests that one of strategies that Minimalists were interested in was "a profound questioning of the work of art in its relationship to the individual spectator and to society" (Lucie-Smith, 78). Frances Colpitt, the author of *Minimal Art: The Critical Perspective* (1990), also argues that "the spectator is given a new role as a contributor of meaning," and that this strategy distinguishes Minimalism from previous modernist art (Colpitt, 134). According to Brandon Taylor, works of Minimalists "required the presence of the viewer in an abstract personification to function in the completion of the work" (Taylor, 15). An art historian, Darby Bannard (1934-) explains, "It is part of the nature of these works [Minimalism] to act as triggers for thought and emotion pre-existing in the viewer and conditioned by the viewer's knowledge of the style in its several forms" (Bannard, 33). It is clear that these art historians approach Minimalism in a very similar manner to the way the literary theorists approach Reception Theory. Both are concerned with reader/ spectator involvement and recognize the importance of one's horizon of expectations. In addition, both suggest literary/ artistic experiences exist in the process of creating meanings through the interactions between the text/ work of art and the reader/ spectator. Moreover, both have influenced how we look at the history of literature and art.

Reception theory also provides a means of understanding media texts by understanding how these texts are read by audiences. Theorists who analyze media through reception studies are concerned with the experience of cinema and television viewing for spectators, and how meaning is created through that experience. An important concept of reception theory is that the media text—the

individual movie or television program - has no inherent meaning in and of itself. Instead, meaning is created in the interaction between spectator and text; in other words, meaning is created as the viewer watches and processes the film. Kristen Anderson Wagner clarifies that "part of the reluctance on the part of film theorists to turn to reception studies is based in the historical uses of audience analysis. In the early twentieth century, research on how films were being interpreted by audiences was used to advocate censorship. Reformers worried that spectators, especially children, were negatively influenced by what they saw onscreen, and they fought to ensure that the messages in films would be "appropriate," in their view, for impressionable viewers. Later, the film studios turned to audience research in the form of demographic information to learn how to market their films. But although the use of reception analysis for the purposes of censorship and marketing has contributed to film theorists' distrust of reception theory, reception theory has gained acceptance and is acknowledged to be an important method of analyzing how audiences experience and interpret films". (13)

According to Marxist theorist Louis Althusser, in *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, the capitalist system operates through the use of so-called repressive state apparatuses (RSAs) such as the police, government, and military, and also through ideological state apparatuses (ISAs), which include schools, the family, religion, and media systems. RSAs are public institutions and function primarily through repression and violence. ISAs, on the other hand, function through ideology and work by enticing individuals to accept subject positions which benefit the dominant classes and perpetuate capitalism. According to this theory, the mass media, as an ISA, transmits the dominant ideology to passive spectators who internalize this ideology and become cooperative members of the capitalist system (127–133).

Althusser's theory of the media as an ideological state apparatus was embraced by classical film theorists, who examine the ways that the cinema