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Indeterminacy and The Reader's Response
To selected Fiction by
Nathaniel Hawthorne

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To my dear father and mother

Thank you for everything

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بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم
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Table of Contents

Preface.....	1-5
Chapter 1: Reader-Response Theory.....	6 -24
Chapter2: Indeterminacy in	25-61
“The Minister’s Black Veil” (1837).....	26
“Young Goodman Brown” (1846).....	43
Chapter 3: Indeterminacy in <u>The Scarlet Letter</u> (1850)...	62-107
Conclusion.....	108-118
Selected Bibliography.....	119-133

Preface

The present study is concerned with the Reader-Response theory focusing on the German literary theorist, Wolfgang Iser (1926-2007). His contribution to literary theory began in 1970 when he presented his theory of “aesthetic response” followed by two important works The Implied Reader (1972) and The Act of Reading (1976). These works redirected the attention of literary theorists from the author to the reader (David Albertson). His concept of the role of the reader in producing a meaning of a literary text is manifested in his famous article “Indeterminacy and the Reader’s Response I Prose Fiction” (1971). Thus, the research is a Reader’s Response study of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s two short stories “The Minister’s Black Veil” (1837), “Young Goodman Brown” (1846) and his novel The Scarlet Letter (1850) based on Iser’s article as a frame of reference.

Before dealing with ‘indeterminacy’ in Hawthorne, it is important to refer to Timothy Bahti’s “Ambiguity and Indeterminacy: The Juncture (1986) which presents two points of views concerning the two terms. First, he says that M. H. Abrams described ambiguity as a term “widely used to signify...two or more meanings of a word or phrase” (209). It

is an alternative term to such terms as “Multiple meaning” and “plurisignation”. On the other hand, Abrams’s colleague Jonathan Culler, twenty-five years later, introduced “a newfangled, high-tech term for ‘ambiguity’ which is ‘indeterminacy’. Culler regards ‘indeterminacy’ as an interpretive problem where multiple meanings are less in the text. Thus, Bahti concludes that “the two terms are oriented towards different sites of literary meaning” (210).

Based on Bahti’s view, the study differentiates between the two terms while examining Hawthorne’s works focusing on the significance of the two terms in stimulating the reader to participate and use his own imagination to unravel the mysteries of the texts whether they are indeterminacies or ambiguities.

Hence, reader-response criticism is a literary critical theory which suggests that a text gains meaning by the purposeful act of a reader reading and interpreting it. It holds that the reader is a necessary third party in the author-text-reader relationship that constitutes the literary work. The relationship between reader and text is highly appreciated. In other words, text does not exist without a reader. Interpretation under reader - response criticism is given a wider concern than in formalism or structuralism.

Reader – response criticism, which first emerged in the 1960s, is of many different kinds, but they all focus on the role and activity of the reader during the process of reading. This means, reader-response criticism discards the text's independence, its complete separateness, in favour of its reliance on the reader's conception or participation. "Perception is viewed as interpretive; reading is not the discovery of meaning but the creation of it. It thus substitutes examination of a text in- and-of itself with discussions of the reading process, the "interaction" of reader and text" (Mailloux 20).

Prior to the analysis of the chosen narratives it is necessary to lay the theoretical basis of the reader-response theory. Within this framework, Chapter One is devoted to a historical background of the Reader-Response criticism with a brief reference to some Greek critics such as Plato and Aristotle. It moves to the critics of the twentieth century such as I.A. Richards (1893-1979), Louise M. Rosenblatt (1904-2005). Finally it presents some of the views of the figureheads in literary theory, namely Stanley Fish (1938), Norman Holland (1927), David Bleich (1936) and Wolfgang Iser (1926-2007). The aim behind the selection of these names is to

show the different views underlying reader's-response theory. In addition, the chapter concentrates on Iser's view of indeterminacy and its significance in driving the reader to search for meaning.

Richard Chase holds that Hawthorne belongs to the Romantic Period (1820-1860) which values the individual reader's senses and imagination. This has stimulated the researcher to choose his selected literary works to be examined according to the reader response theory. Another reason for choosing Hawthorne in particular is that many of his works are characterized by being indeterminate and ambiguous which stimulate the reader to unravel the mysteries "by a free play of meaning projection" (Prospecting 9) to fulfill the comprehension of the text. Moreover, critics such as William Crary Brownell sees that Hawthorne's "writings satisfy academic standards and appeal to the conservatism of culture...As such they are read-more precisely, have been read by everyone" (qtd in Brodhead 205). Brownell adds that while reading Hawthorne's writings, the reader enjoys "practical immunity from the readjustment and rectification of later re-reading" (205). Moreover, his works have a timeless quality since it is neither a commentary of his time, nor a historically accurate description of Puritan New England. It is an ageless account of the eternal themes of the human

condition. In his fiction, he sought to create an artificial reverence for the past, so that men may look backward to their ancestry, consequently, look forward to their posterity (Trepanier 316). That is why he is viewed as a typical choice for this reader-response study.

Chapter Two and Three apply the theory on particular works of Nathaniel Hawthorne. Chapter Two presents two short stories of Nathaniel Hawthorne. The first short story is “The Minister’s Black Veil” from *Twice – Told Tales* (1837), a collection of short stories. The chapter stresses on several different and conflicting actions in the story which render it as one of the most ambiguous stories and one of the most contentious works in American Literature. The second story is “Young Goodman Brown” (1846). The chapter will demonstrate how Hawthorne leaves many ambiguous questions through this short story to the reader to fill in the gaps to find for himself an individual meaning for the text.

Chapter Three offers a Reader-Response analysis of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s The Scarlet Letter (1850) trying to demonstrate his continual use of “ambiguity” or “multiple choice” that gives the novel a certain air of mystery, therefore, allowing the reader’s participation in the production of textual meaning.

The thesis indicates how Hawthorne skillfully used both “indeterminacy” and “ambiguity” increasing the difficulty to reduce his stories to a simple view of life. It also focuses on the role of the reader who is given responsibility to produce a meaning of the literary text.

Chapter One

The Reader-Response Theory

Theory:

The Reader's-response criticism focuses on the role and activity of the reader rather than on the author or the text. Jane P. Tompkins states that reader-response criticism is a term that is associated with the work of critics who use the words reader, the reading process, and response to mark out an area for investigation (ix). Reader's-response criticism sees the reader as a necessary element in the author-text-reader relationship that constitutes the literary work.

Steven Mailloux's Interpretive Conventions (1982) provides a useful starting point for the following discussion of reader-response criticism. He states that all Reader-Response critics concentrate on readers during the reading process. Some examine individual readers through psychological participation such as Norman Holland and David Bleich; others present social reading models such as Stanley Fish and Wolfgang Iser. But all share the notion that "it is impossible to separate perceiver from perceived, subject from object" (Mailloux 20).

Elmer Kennedy-Andrews holds that reader-response criticism allowed for differences in interpretation, a plurality of possible meanings in a given text and it is the reader's responsibility to interact with these to create the meaning and experience of a literary work (Kennedy-Andrews 155).

It is necessary here to distinguish between Reader-Response Criticism on one hand and Formalism and New Criticism on the other hand. The latter see the literary work as an independent object in its own right. Both Formalism and New Criticism direct their attention to the inherent nature of a literary work focusing their analyses on the interplay and relationships between “the text’s essential verbal elements” (Murfin and Ray 132). In contrast, reader-response theory recognizes the reader as an active agent who completes the meaning through interpretation. Reader’s-Response theorists view literature as a performing art in which each reader creates his or her point of view. The text itself has no meaning until it is read by a reader, which means that the reader is the one who creates the meaning and thus his role cannot be omitted from the understanding of the literary work being read.

Ross Murfin and Supryia M. Ray assert that although reader-response criticism emerged in the United States in the 1970s, it is in one respect as old as the foundations of Western culture. The ancient Greeks and Romans tended to view literature as rhetoric, as making an audience react in a certain way.

M. A. R. Habib states that the word “criticism” derives from the ancient Greek term “Krites”, meaning “judge”. The “classical” period emerged around 500BC, the period of the great dramatists as Euripides, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Plato and Aristotle. During this period of a thousand years, poets, philosophers, rhetoricians, grammarians, and critics established many of the basic terms, concepts and questions that shaped the future of literary criticism. These include the

concept of “mimesis” or imitation; the ideal of the organic unity of a literary work and moral functions of literature, the connection between literature, philosophy, and rhetoric and the impact of a literary performance on an audience (10).

Both Plato and Aristotle agree that poetry is essentially a mode of imitation. But they have two different views of imitation. Aristotle sees poetry as having a positive function. For him, “imitation is both a mode of learning and associated with pleasure” (Habib 50). As for Plato, he perceives that “imitation itself embodied a step away from truth, since it produced an imperfect copy of the form or essence of a given entity” (50).

Habib also adds that Aristotle views the audience as an “elite” which affects his treatments for the construction of tragedy. His notions anticipate developments in numerous fields of literary criticism: the matter of connection between art and reality, the psychological and moral effects of literature and the nature and function of the audience which paves the way to Reader’s-Response criticism (60).

In the twentieth century, several critics such as I. A. Richards, Louise M. Rosenblatt, Michael Riffaterre and others wrote long before 1970 and their attitudes anticipated the thinking of Reader–Response theorists. Reader-response criticism may have started with I.A.Richard’s discussions of emotional response in the 1920s. Richards asserts in Practical Criticism (1929) that readers’ feelings and experiences provides a kind of reality check, a way of testing the

authenticity of emotions and events represented in literary works (Murfin and Ray 322)

In the 1930s, Louise M. Rosenblatt began developing a theory of reading that shaped the relation between reader and text. In her essay “Towards a Transactional Theory of Reading” (1969), she stated that

a poem is what the reader lives through under the guidance of the text and experiences as relevant to the text... and the reader finds it necessary to construct the “speaker”-the “voice”, the “persona”, the “tone”- as part of what he decodes from the text (36).

Rosenblatt viewed the text as a guide during the reading process by which the reader interprets “what has emerged from his relationship with the verbal symbols” (38).

In the 1950s, many critics contributed to the development of a reader-response criticism, for example David Bleich, Stanley Fish, Norman Holland and Wolfgang Iser. Norman Holland is a psychoanalytic critic who believes that readers' motives strongly influence how they read. He developed a detailed account of literary matters in articles and books, for example, The Dynamics of literary Response (1968), Poems in Persons (1973), and “5 Readers Reading” (1975). Vincent B. Leitch states that Holland’s studies focused on the connection between readers and texts depending on the outcomes of ‘ego psychology’ as a means of reaching the textual meaning.

In "Unity Identity Text Self" (1975), Holland holds that as one reads, he uses the literary work to symbolize and finally to replace himself. While interacting with the work, the reader reacts to the literary text with the same psychological responses he counter to events in his daily life. This means that each reader will discover in the literary work the kind of thing he/she characteristically wishes or fears the most. "Therefore, to respond, we need to be able to re-create from the literary work our characteristic strategies for dealing with those deep fears and wishes" (qtd in Tompkins 124). Holland sees the readers' interpretations are products of the fears, defenses, needs, and desires they project onto the text. The interpretation is thus a psychological process rather than an intellectual one. Then, reader-response might be viewed as purely subjective and impressionistic. Therefore, it might not be perceived as a school of criticism.

According to Holland, the reader makes sense of the text by creating a meaningful unity out of its elements. The meaning is the conversion of fantasy into a unity which the reader finds logical and enjoyable. Thus, the unity lies in the mind of a reader. Each reader creates a unity for a text out of his own identity theme, and thus "each will have different ways of making the text into an experience with a coherence and significance that satisfies" (qtd in Tompkins 126).

Leitch states that critics of Holland's psychoanalysis of readers registered numerous complaints. Among such criticisms were: he shifted the concept of unity from the text to the self, he reduced all reading self-interested, he unwisely