

## Reader-Response Criticism

### *Polyvalence*

Reader-response critics are interested in the phenomenon of “polyvalence”—why texts mean different things to different people. They pay special attention to four factors that often cause readers to understand or experience texts differently.

### *Social Location*

The social location of a reader refers to identifying characteristics such as age, gender, nationality, race, health, career, social class, personality type, and marital status. Readers who share certain aspects of one social location tend to understand texts in similar ways that can be distinguished from understandings produced by readers from a different social location.

### *Reading Strategy*

The manner in which a text is received affects the way in which it is interpreted. For example, if a text is heard out loud, it might be understood differently than if it is read silently. If a section of a text is read as a pericope, it might be understood differently than if it is encountered as an episode in a longer work. If a book is read as a part of a larger book (“the Bible”), it might be understood differently than if it is read as a freestanding work.

### *Empathy Choice*

With narrative literature, readers will experience the meaning of a story differently depending on the characters with whom they most identify.

### *Conception of Meaning*

Diverse interpretations of a text's meaning are determined at a basic level by different philosophical concepts of what constitutes meaning (a cognitive message to be passed from author to reader, or an affective or emotive response produced in readers through the experience of receiving the text).

### ***Expected and Unexpected Readings***

Some reader-response critics classify different interpretations or responses to texts as expected or unexpected readings. An "expected reading" is one that seems to be invited by signals within the text itself. An "unexpected reading" is one in which factors extrinsic to the text seem to resist or ignore the text's signals. In terms of narrative criticism, an expected reading is one that is compatible with the response of a text's implied readers, while an unexpected reading is one that is incompatible with the response of a text's implied readers.

For example, imagine four people reading the story of the passion of Christ recorded in Matthew 26–27. They respond emotionally to the narrative:

Reader One is *inspired* by the story because it presents Jesus as a man of integrity who is willing to die nobly for his convictions.

Reader Two is *traumatized* by the story because it reveals the depth of human depravity on the part of those who denounce, betray, and torture an innocent man.

Reader Three is *comforted* by the story because it portrays Jesus's death as an atoning sacrifice through which God offers forgiveness and mercy to the undeserving.

Reader Four is *delighted* by the story because it reports the gruesome execution of a meddling busybody who tried to tell everyone how they should live.

Reader-response critics would classify the first three responses as expected readings: though very different from one another, all three respond to cues within the text (and so exemplify polyvalent responses). The critics would classify the fourth response as an unexpected reading: it responds to the story in a way that the narrative does not solicit or invite.