

Reader-Response Criticism

Literary criticism is not an abstract, intellectual exercise; it is a natural human response to literature. Literary criticism is nothing more than discourse—spoken or written—about literature. Reader-response criticism attempts to describe what happens in the reader’s mind while interpreting a work of fiction. This type of literary criticism recognizes that like writing, reading is a creative process. Reader-response critics believe that no text provides self-contained meaning; literary texts do not have meaning independently from readers’ interpretations. According to this school, a text is not complete until it is read and interpreted.

The easiest way to explain reader-response criticism is to relate it to the common experience of re-reading a favorite book after many years. A book one read as a child might seem shockingly different when re-read as an adolescent or as an adult. The character once remembered favorably might seem less admirable while another character becomes more sympathetic. The book has not changed. However, our life experiences between the first reading and any subsequent re-reading can affect the way we respond to a story.

Reader-response criticism explores how different individuals see the same text differently. It emphasizes how religious, cultural, and social values affect the way we read and respond to a work of fiction. Of course, no two individuals will necessarily read a text in exactly the same way nor

will they agree on its meaning. Rather than declare one interpretation correct and the other mistaken, reader-response criticism recognizes that different insights are inevitable. Instead of trying to ignore or reconcile the contradictions, it explores them. Reader-response criticism also overlaps with gender criticism in exploring how men and women read the same text with different assumptions.

While reader-response criticism rejects the notion that there can be a single correct reading for a literary text, it doesn’t consider all readings permissible. Each text creates limits to its possible interpretations. We cannot suddenly change the setting, the way a story’s plot unfolds, or redefine its characters.

Keeping a reader’s journal is a great way to keep track of the fiction you read and your emotional responses to the stories. You can use the journal to explore ideas for essays, note important quotations, and list words to look up in the dictionary. Use your reader’s journal while studying *Sun, Stone, and Shadows* to provide a convenient way of documenting your own response to the stories you read in the anthology.

Excerpted from *The Longman Anthology of Short Fiction* by Dana Gioia and R. S. Gwynn, eds.