

Dr. David Mathewson, Hermeneutics, Session 15, Reader-Response Criticism Resources from NotebookLM

1) Abstract, 2) Audio podcast, 3) Briefing Document, 4) Study Guide, and 5) FAQs

1. Abstract of Mathewson, Hermeneutics, Session 15, Reader-Response Criticism, Biblicalelearning.org, BeL

This lecture excerpt from a Hermeneutics course explores reader-response criticism, contrasting **conservative** and **radical** approaches. **Conservative** approaches, exemplified by Wolfgang Iser, suggest the text guides the reader's interpretation within certain limits, while **radical** approaches, championed by Stanley Fish, posit that readers create both meaning and text. The lecture discusses the implications of these differing viewpoints for biblical interpretation, including the role of the reader's background, community, and the possibility of objective meaning. Finally, the lecture previews future discussions on deconstructionism and ideological approaches to biblical texts.

2. 18 - minute Audio Podcast Created on the basis of Dr. Mathewson, Hermeneutics, Session 15 – Double click icon to play in Windows media player or go to the Biblicalelearning.org [BeL] Site and click the audio podcast link there (Introduction & Languages → Introductory Series → Hermeneutics).



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3. Briefing Document

Okay, here is a detailed briefing document summarizing the key themes and ideas from the provided lecture on Reader Response Criticism:

Briefing Document: Reader Response Criticism

Overview: This lecture provides a comprehensive overview of Reader Response Criticism, a significant approach to hermeneutics that shifts the focus of meaning-making from the author and the text to the reader. The lecture traces the historical development of hermeneutics, contrasting reader-centered approaches with author-centered and text-centered approaches. It explores different forms of reader response, ranging from conservative to radical, and concludes with an evaluation of its contributions and potential pitfalls.

Key Themes and Ideas:

1. Shifting Focus in Hermeneutics:

- The lecture outlines a progression in hermeneutical approaches:
- **Author-centered:** Focused on uncovering the author's intended meaning. The text's life and meaning were primarily seen as originating from the author.
- **Text-centered:** Focused on the text as the primary locus of meaning. The text was seen as having a life of its own.
- **Reader-centered:** Focused on the reader's role in constructing meaning. The text is seen as having no life until a reader gives it life by engaging with it.
- The shift to reader-centered approaches arises from difficulties in achieving objective meaning through author-centered or text-centered approaches.
- **Quote:** *"According to author-centered approaches, the text, the author gave life to the text. According to text-centered approaches, the text had a life of its own. But according to reader-centered approaches, texts have no life until the readers give them a life by reading the text."*

1. Post-Modern Influences:

- Reader response criticism emerges within a post-structural and postmodern context. Postmodern approaches to interpretation are characterized by:

- **Pluralism:** Rejection of a single "correct" interpretation. There is no hierarchy or correct meaning, but rather a leveling effect.
- **Value-ladenness:** The recognition that all interpretations are influenced by the reader's predispositions and perspectives. *"There's no such thing as an objective, neutral interpretation of a text, but one brings one's own predispositions and one's own viewpoint and one's own perspective to interpret the biblical text, what one values, what one finds in the text, what one wants to find."*
- **Community Influence:** The idea that reading communities shape our interpretations.

1. Core Concepts of Reader Response Criticism:

- **Readers Make Sense of Texts:** Meaning is not inherent in the text but emerges from the interaction between the reader and the text. Readers are active agents in the meaning making process.
- **Texts as Meaning Potentials:** Texts are seen as having "meaning potentials" rather than fixed meanings that readers uncover.
- **Active Reader:** The reader is not a passive recipient of meaning, but an active agent in creating or discovering it.
- **Gaps in Texts:** Texts often contain gaps or ambiguities that readers must fill in using their own background knowledge, experiences and imagination.
- **Quote:** *"Again, under this approach, at best, the text only has meaning potentials. The text only has the potential for meaning that the reader must now discover or create."*

1. Varieties of Reader Response Criticism:

- **Historical Reader Approach:** Focuses on the original readers for whom the text was intended, asking how they would have understood it.
- **Conservative Reader Response (Wolfgang Iser):** Emphasizes that the text itself guides the reader.
- Recognizes constraints on what a reader can do with the text.
- Introduces the concept of the "implied reader" or the "ideal reader" - a reader the text assumes.
- Texts have gaps that the reader must creatively fill in.

- **Quote:** *"According to Iser, texts have gaps in them, left there by the author, that the reader is required to fill in order to make sense of the text, and the reader must fill in those gaps so that meaning can emerge from the text."*
- Uses the example of the birth narrative in Luke to illustrate how readers fill in gaps.
- **Radical Reader Response (Stanley Fish):** Argues that readers do not merely make sense of texts but actually create them.
- Denies the existence of an objective text or meaning apart from the reader's interpretation. *"According to radical reader response criticism, as advocated by Stanley Fish, there is no text at all. But instead, the readers create the text."*
- Uses the inkblot test and a dot-to-dot analogy to illustrate how the reader is creating the text.
- The text becomes a "mirror" reflecting the reader's own perspectives and biases.
- Interpretation *precedes* the text; the text does not exist before interpretation.
- Meaning is determined by the "interpretive community" that one belongs to.

1. Evaluation of Reader Response Criticism:

- **Problems with radical reader response: Subjectivity:** Radical approaches can lead to uncontrolled subjectivity and relativism in interpretation.
- **Text Distortion:** The idea that a text is simply a mirror is at odds with the view of Scripture as the inspired word of God and a means of communicating God's intent.
- **Lack of Explanation for Change:** Radical approaches cannot explain how readers are changed by a text, how they change interpretive communities, or how they gain new insights from reading.
- **Lack of Criteria for Evaluation:** It becomes difficult to evaluate good or bad readings, and difficult for communities to be self-critical.
- **Contributions of reader response criticism Recognizes our presuppositions:** Reminds us that we do not approach the text as neutral, objective observers. We are influenced by our background, predispositions, and communities.
- **Active role of reader:** Highlights the active role of the reader in the interpretive process. Readers are actively involved in discovering meaning.

- **Need for humility:** Encourages humility, as readers must recognize their own limitations and biases.
- **Importance of historical and implied reader:** Reminds us of the importance of understanding both the historical context and the ideal reader for whom the text was written.
- **Quotes:** *"Reader response criticism has reminded us that we are not neutral, objective observers and passive observers of a biblical text."*
- *"Reader response criticism reminds me of the need to approach interpretation with humility, to recognize the danger of my own short-sightedness and the assumptions that I bring to the text."*

1. **Recommendations for a Reader-Centered Approach:**

- **Recognize Assumptions:** Be aware of your own presuppositions and values.
- **Allow Text to Challenge:** Be willing to let the text and other readings challenge and correct your assumptions.
- **Approach with Humility:** Recognize your own limitations and biases.
- **Listen to Others:** Be open to other interpretations.
- **Quote:** *"In approaching a biblical text as readers, we should recognize the assumptions and presuppositions that we bring to the text and the possibility of those distorting and influencing the way we look at a text, influencing for good and for bad."*

1. **Transition to Deconstructionism:**

- The lecture concludes by noting that radical reader response criticism can lead to deconstructionism, which posits that meaning is unstable and that there is nothing to tie meaning to.
- The next session will look at deconstructionism as well as ideological approaches to the text, such as feminist readings.

Conclusion:

This lecture presents a comprehensive introduction to Reader Response Criticism, exploring its different forms and evaluating its strengths and weaknesses. It emphasizes the active role of the reader in the process of meaning-making, the influence of personal perspectives, and the need for humility when interpreting texts. It also recognizes the challenges and problems that arise with the most radical forms of reader response theory.

4. Mathewson, Hermeneutics, Session 15, Reader-Response Criticism

Reader Response Criticism: A Study Guide

Quiz

1. What is hermeneutical pluralism, and how does it relate to post-modern approaches to interpretation? *Hermeneutical pluralism asserts that no single worldview, religious belief, or interpretation of reality is correct, advocating instead for a leveling effect where all interpretations are considered equally valid. This is central to many post-modern approaches which reject the idea of a singular, objective truth.*
2. According to reader-response theory, what are the three different positions texts have occupied? *According to author-centered approaches, the text had life given by the author. According to text-centered approaches, the text had a life of its own. And according to reader-centered approaches, texts have no life until readers give them a life by reading the text.*
3. Briefly explain the difference between a conservative and a radical reader-response approach. *Conservative reader response, like Iser's text-guided approach, emphasizes that the text imposes constraints on the reader's interpretation while encouraging creativity. Radical approaches, like Fish's, prioritize the reader's role in creating the text and meaning with little regard for constraints.*
4. What does Wolfgang Iser mean by the "implied reader," and how does that concept limit reader interpretation? *The implied reader is the ideal reader assumed by the text, with whom the actual reader must identify to properly understand it. This concept implies that the reader isn't completely autonomous and should follow some interpretive guidelines.*
5. How does a radical reader response approach view the relationship between the reader and the text? *In radical reader response, the text becomes more like a mirror reflecting the reader's predispositions, beliefs, and experiences. The reader is considered the primary agent in creating the text's meaning.*
6. How would Stanley Fish respond to the idea that there is a correct way to interpret a text? *Stanley Fish would reject the idea of a single correct*

interpretation. He argues that interpretation proceeds the text, and meaning is determined by the interpretive community to which the reader belongs, not by the author or the text itself.

7. According to radical reader response criticism, what are the constraints of meaning? *According to Stanley Fish, the only constraints on meaning come from the interpretive community one belongs to. The community's values, beliefs, and interests determine the correct approach and how a text is read.*
8. According to Mathewson, what are two major criticisms of radical reader-response criticism? *Radical approaches relativize meaning and fail to account for how readers are changed and transformed by reading a text. Nor can it explain how readers change interpretive communities.*
9. According to Mathewson, what are two important contributions of reader response to biblical interpretation? *Reader response approaches remind us that readers aren't neutral, objective observers of texts. Reader response also shows us the reader is actively involved in the interpretive process.*
10. What should a reader recognize about themselves before interpreting a text? *Readers should recognize their own assumptions, presuppositions, values, and community influences as all having the potential to influence their reading of a text, for good or for bad.*

Quiz Answer Key

1. *Hermeneutical pluralism asserts that no single worldview, religious belief, or interpretation of reality is correct, advocating instead for a leveling effect where all interpretations are considered equally valid. This is central to many post-modern approaches which reject the idea of a singular, objective truth.*
2. *According to author-centered approaches, the text had life given by the author. According to text-centered approaches, the text had a life of its own. And according to reader-centered approaches, texts have no life until readers give them a life by reading the text.*
3. *Conservative reader response, like Iser's text-guided approach, emphasizes that the text imposes constraints on the reader's interpretation while encouraging creativity. Radical approaches, like Fish's, prioritize the reader's role in creating the text and meaning with little regard for constraints.*

4. *The implied reader is the ideal reader assumed by the text, with whom the actual reader must identify to properly understand it. This concept implies that the reader isn't completely autonomous and should follow some interpretive guidelines.*
5. *In radical reader response, the text becomes more like a mirror reflecting the reader's predispositions, beliefs, and experiences. The reader is considered the primary agent in creating the text's meaning.*
6. *Stanley Fish would reject the idea of a single correct interpretation. He argues that interpretation proceeds the text, and meaning is determined by the interpretive community to which the reader belongs, not by the author or the text itself.*
7. *According to Stanley Fish, the only constraints on meaning come from the interpretive community one belongs to. The community's values, beliefs, and interests determine the correct approach and how a text is read.*
8. *Radical approaches relativize meaning and fail to account for how readers are changed and transformed by reading a text. Nor can it explain how readers change interpretive communities.*
9. *Reader response approaches remind us that readers aren't neutral, objective observers of texts. Reader response also shows us the reader is actively involved in the interpretive process.*
10. *Readers should recognize their own assumptions, presuppositions, values, and community influences as all having the potential to influence their reading of a text, for good or for bad.*

Essay Questions

1. Discuss the progression of hermeneutical approaches from author-centered to text-centered to reader-centered. What are the strengths and weaknesses of each approach?
2. Compare and contrast the conservative and radical approaches to reader-response criticism. How do their views on the role of the reader in creating meaning differ?
3. Critically evaluate Stanley Fish's claim that "interpretation precedes the text." What are the implications of this idea for the possibility of objective meaning in literature?
4. How does reader response criticism challenge traditional understandings of textual authority and authorial intent? What are the benefits and drawbacks of these challenges?
5. What does it mean to approach a text with "humility" in the context of reader response theory? How does the acknowledgment of our own biases and presuppositions affect the interpretation process?

Glossary of Key Terms

- **Author-Centered Approach:** A method of interpretation that focuses on understanding the author's intention in creating the text. The goal is to uncover the original meaning intended by the author.
- **Text-Centered Approach:** A method of interpretation that emphasizes the text itself as the locus of meaning. The focus is on the structure and content of the text, rather than the author or the reader.
- **Reader-Centered Approach:** A method of interpretation that focuses on the reader's role in creating meaning. Meaning is seen as arising from the interaction between the reader and the text.
- **Hermeneutical Pluralism:** The idea that there is no single correct interpretation of a text or reality. Instead, multiple interpretations are considered valid.
- **Post-Structuralism:** A theoretical approach that challenges the idea of fixed meanings and stable structures. It emphasizes the instability of language and the role of context in interpretation.

- **Conservative Reader Response:** A type of reader-response criticism that acknowledges the reader's role in interpretation but maintains that the text imposes constraints and guides the reader.
- **Radical Reader Response:** A type of reader-response criticism that asserts the reader is the primary agent in creating meaning, often dismissing authorial intent and textual constraints.
- **Implied Reader:** The ideal reader assumed by the text. It represents the kind of reader that the author seems to have in mind, and with whom the actual reader should try to identify.
- **Interpretive Community:** A group of readers who share a common set of assumptions, values, and beliefs that shape how they interpret texts.
- **Deconstructionism:** A philosophical approach that questions the stability of meaning and the possibility of objective truth. It often sees texts as self-contradictory and unstable.
- **Historical Reader:** The original audience for which a text was written. Considering the historical reader is an approach to understanding the text in its original context.
- **Ideological Criticism:** An approach to interpreting a text by examining the underlying ideologies, values, and power structures that influence its creation and reception.
- **Gaps:** The places where a text is not explicit. Readers must fill in these gaps to form a comprehensive understanding.

5. FAQs on Mathewson, Hermeneutics, Session 15, Reader-Response Criticism, Biblicalelearning.org (BeL)

Reader Response Criticism: An FAQ

1. **What is reader-response criticism and how does it differ from author-centered and text-centered approaches to interpretation?** Reader-response criticism is an approach to interpretation that emphasizes the role of the reader in creating meaning from a text. It contrasts with author-centered approaches, which prioritize the author's intended meaning, and text-centered approaches, which focus on the text itself as the primary source of meaning. In reader-response criticism, the reader is seen as an active participant who brings their own experiences, values, and perspectives to the text, which influence how they understand and interpret it. Where author-centered approaches view the text as having life given by the author and text-centered approaches view the text as having a life of its own, reader-centered approaches posit that a text has no life until a reader reads it and gives it meaning.
2. **What is hermeneutical pluralism and how does it relate to post-modern approaches to interpretation?** Hermeneutical pluralism is the idea that there is no single, correct interpretation of a text, worldview, or reality. It is a characteristic of post-modern approaches, which often reject the idea of objective truth or meaning. These approaches emphasize that meaning is value-laden, shaped by personal predispositions and the communities to which one belongs, and often view any claim to one correct meaning as an exercise of power. In this view, meaning is considered to be subjective and dependent on the reader's perspective, rejecting the hierarchical view that some interpretations are more correct than others.

3. **What are the key differences between conservative and radical approaches to reader-response criticism?** A conservative approach to reader-response criticism, exemplified by Wolfgang Iser, acknowledges that while readers play an active role in creating meaning, the text itself provides constraints. It argues that texts have "gaps" that readers must fill in using their creativity but within limits guided by the text and the author. This approach acknowledges the importance of the implied reader and the text's inherent structures as limitations on interpretation. In contrast, radical reader-response criticism, championed by Stanley Fish, asserts that readers not only interpret but actually create the text. Meaning is entirely dependent on the reader's subjective experiences and is not tied to authorial intent or objective structures in the text itself. This approach views a text as a mirror, reflecting the reader's perspective, not a window to meaning beyond the reader.
4. **How does the concept of "gaps" in a text influence the process of interpretation according to conservative reader-response theory?** According to conservative reader-response theory, particularly that of Wolfgang Iser, texts contain gaps that the author intentionally leaves for readers to fill in. These gaps are not seen as flaws, but rather as opportunities for readers to actively participate in creating the meaning of the text. For example, the birth narrative of Jesus in Luke 2 leaves a number of unanswered questions that readers fill in using cultural assumptions and traditions. By filling these gaps, readers use their creativity and imagination, guided by the text itself, to make the story understandable, making reading an active rather than a passive process.
5. **According to Stanley Fish's radical reader-response theory, what determines the "correct" interpretation of a text, and why?** According to Stanley Fish, the "correct" interpretation of a text is determined by the interpretive community to which the reader belongs. He argues that there is no inherent meaning in the text itself, and that all readers inevitably interpret texts through the lens of their own cultural, social, and personal experiences. Thus, the meaning of a text is not found in the text itself nor is it solely determined by an individual's interpretation, but rather is agreed upon by a specific group with shared assumptions, values and approaches to the text. This interpretive community effectively defines what is acceptable or a "correct" interpretation of a text by collectively affirming or denouncing certain readings of it.

6. **What are some of the criticisms leveled against radical reader-response criticism, particularly in relation to the Bible?** Several criticisms challenge radical reader-response criticism. First, it struggles to explain how readers can be genuinely transformed or experience new insight through texts if they only see their own reflections in them. The text loses its power as a separate entity with meaning, thereby reducing its significance. Second, it fails to establish any criteria for good versus bad or better versus worse interpretations, raising the question of whether all readings are equally valid. Third, it does not easily account for the possibility of interpretive communities being wrong or the possibility of a text challenging or reshaping a reader's own community. Ultimately, critics argue, the radical approach seems incompatible with the idea of the biblical text as the inspired word of God that communicates meaning to readers and that also seeks an obedient response.
7. **What are some of the potential contributions of reader-response criticism to interpreting biblical texts?** Despite its potential pitfalls, reader-response criticism has made important contributions to understanding biblical texts. It emphasizes the fact that readers approach texts with existing biases, experiences and cultural contexts. By acknowledging these factors, reader response critics aim to foster a more humble approach to interpretation by acknowledging that no one is a neutral, objective reader. It also highlights the active role of the reader in engaging in a dialogue with the text, acknowledging that the communication of the text is incomplete without the interaction of a reader and that meaning is a product of that interaction. Finally, the concept of the historical and implied reader invites a deeper and more careful look at the original audience of the text and the ideal audience the author envisioned, which can lead to deeper engagement and understanding.
8. **What is the role of humility and community in a responsible approach to reader-response criticism?** A responsible approach to reader-response criticism necessitates both humility and an openness to community. It requires readers to acknowledge their own presuppositions and values, and be prepared to have those challenged and corrected by the text itself and by other readings of that text. It also means listening to diverse perspectives from different interpretive communities, and being willing to recognize our own limitations in understanding a text. This approach seeks a balance between acknowledging our subjective roles as readers and recognizing that the text is meant to be a window into meaning beyond our own experience and biases.