

## READER-RESPONSE CRITICISM: The Role of the Author, Text, and Reader in Interpretation

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Submitted: 10 November 2024 Revision: 12 May 2025 Published: 30 June 2025

### Abstract

Reader-Response Criticism (RRC) examines how meaning is derived from texts, emphasizing the roles of the author, text, and reader in interpretation. Traditionally, RRC scholarship has focused on the interaction between text and reader, with minimal attention to the author's role. This paper broadens the scope to include the author alongside the text and reader, offering a more comprehensive analysis of RRC in biblical interpretation. Using historical and contemporary RRC perspectives, this study categorizes interpretive approaches into conservative, moderate, and liberal, each with varying emphases on the author, text, and reader. The article analyzes key theories in conservative RRC, which prioritize the author's intent, moderate RRC, which balances reader and text, and liberal RRC, which centers the reader's interpretation. Findings reveal significant implications for understanding scriptural and literary texts, where the choice of RRC approach shapes interpretive outcomes and highlights potential conflicts between subjective and objective readings. This study contributes to the field by providing a structured framework for RRC, underscoring the complexity of meaning-making and advancing critical discourse on the interpretive process.

**Keywords:** Reader-Response criticism; author; text, reader; interpretation

### INTRODUCTION

How is meaning or correct interpretation derived from a text? Or, what is the correct interpretation of a text? Throughout history, these questions have been among the most significant and consequential that humanity has faced. For perceived correct interpretations of texts—specifically, the Bible—have caused people to accept or reject “religion,” fight wars or be pacifists, and adopt particular philosophies or ideologies.<sup>1</sup> For this reason, it is important to understand how Scripture is interpreted. But, because of the space constraints of this paper, and the variety of biblical interpretive methods in existence, the purpose of this paper will be to discuss “Reader-response Criticism” (RRC) and the role of the author, text and reader in that particular method of biblical interpretation.

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<sup>1</sup> These thoughts were inspired by the personal letter of Dr. Graham Twelftree to his Interpreting Scripture class at Regent University.

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This approach is significant because the role of the author has not been focused upon in traditional scholarship on RRC. Indeed, traditional RRC scholarship has only focused upon the role of the reader and the text towards the derivation of meaning. For example, John Barton thinks there are two forms of RRC—a “hard” form where the reader uses the text to construct a meaning, and a “soft” form where meaning is derived from the reader and the text.<sup>2</sup> Kevin Vanhoozer put forward the concepts of “conservative” RRC—where “the text itself invites the reader to participate in the construal of its meaning.” And “radical” RRC, where the reader uses the text for their own aims and purposes.<sup>3</sup> Finally, Robin Parry posited two categories of RRC—a “radical” theory where the reader is stressed over any role the text may play in interpretation and a “moderate” theory where the text and reader contribute to interpretation.<sup>4</sup>

To his credit, Parry did qualify that his categorization was just one way to deal with RRC.<sup>5</sup> Still, it is noteworthy that neither of the three scholars emphasized the role of the author in RRC, but—and appropriately—focused on the role of the reader and the text. This paper, however, will focus on the author, text, and reader because they are three of the main components of the “all important” interpretive process.<sup>6</sup> Further, the amount of emphasis given to the author, text and reader can be used to identify three types of Reader-response critics—which, herein will be classified as conservative, moderate and liberal—these will be the main focus of this paper. Before going into the main focus, however, some definitions of key terms will be given, followed by a brief context of RRC.

The method in this article examines Reader-Response Criticism (RRC) by focusing on the roles of the author, text, and reader in the interpretation process. Traditionally, RRC has predominantly emphasized the interaction between the text and reader, with limited attention given to the author's role. This study broadens the scope by including the author alongside the text and reader, offering a more comprehensive analysis of RRC in biblical interpretation. The article categorizes interpretive approaches into three

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<sup>2</sup> John Barton, “Thinking about Reader-Response Criticism,” *The ExpTim* 113 (2002): 147.

<sup>3</sup> Kevin Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text* (Grand Rapids: Harper Collins, 1998), 28.

<sup>4</sup> Robin Parry, Robin Parry, “Reader-Response Criticism”. *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 659.

<sup>5</sup> Robin Parry, “Reader-Response Criticism”, 659.

<sup>6</sup> Other components are the narrator and the audience, but will not be focused upon because they are not essential in RRC.

types: conservative, moderate, and liberal, each of which emphasizes different aspects of the author, text, and reader in determining meaning. The conservative approach highlights the author's intent as the stable and objective meaning of the text, while the moderate approach views meaning as a product of the interaction between the reader and the text. In contrast, the liberal approach centers the reader's interpretation, asserting that meaning is shaped by the reader's perspective.<sup>7</sup> By exploring these varying approaches, the article contributes to the field by providing a structured framework for RRC, advancing the discourse on the complexities of meaning-making and its implications for biblical and literary interpretation.

## DISCUSSION

### Definitions

The first key term to be defined in order to facilitate the ensuing discussion is "Reader-Response Criticism." RRC is a variety of theories and methodologies in which the reader has a leading role relative to the author and text in determining interpretation or meaning of a particular text.<sup>8</sup> In other words, all Reader-Response Critics focus on the role of the reader in the interpretive process, and do so in varying degrees based on how they view factors such as the author, text, language, world, and the relationship between these and other factors.<sup>9</sup>

Second, "conservative RRC"—unlike that of Vanhoozer, where the text is the main determinant of meaning<sup>10</sup>—suggests that the reader "defines meaning as message the author intends to convey via the text . . . the author's intention is objective and stable . . . meaning of text is meaning of author."<sup>11</sup> Though the reader has the lead role in determining meaning, he or she considers the author's intention as the correct

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<sup>7</sup> John Barton, "Thinking about Reader-Response Criticism": 147; Kevin Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 28; Robin Parry, "Reader-Response Criticism", 659; Eric Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1967), 5.

<sup>8</sup> John Barton, "Thinking about Reader-Response Criticism", 147. Some of these theories and methodologies will be discussed below as part of the main discussion of conservative, moderate and liberal RRC.

<sup>9</sup> Edgar McKnight, "Reader-Response Criticism," *DBI*: 372.

<sup>10</sup> Kevin Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text*, 28. Also, the three methods of RRC are herein categorized as "conservative," "moderate," and "liberal."

<sup>11</sup> Eric Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, 5.

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interpretation. Because of the “conservative” reader-response critic’s focus on the author’s intentions, they can also be called intentionalists.<sup>12</sup>

Third, “moderate RRC”—like Vanhoozer’s “conservative,” and Barton’s “soft” form of RRC—considers meaning to be derived from both the reader and the text.<sup>13</sup> In this “moderate” RRC model, the reader is more involved in the actual determination of meaning than the conservative model since he or she considers themselves part of the interpretive process, rather than assigning the responsibility for meaning to the author’s intent.

The final key term being defined is “liberal RRC,” in this model the role of the reader is the factor in the interpretive process. For the reader is stressed over any role the text or author may play in interpretation. Liberal RRC, then, is similar to Barton’s “hard” form, along with Parry and Vanhoozer’s “radical” theories.

### **The Context of Reader-Response Criticism**

Having defined our key terms, a brief context of RRC will now be given. In his article entitled “Reader Response Theory,” Bernard Lategan well summarized RRC’s context.<sup>14</sup> For Lategan, four developments led to the rise of RRC. The first was studies in the sociology of literature which concluded that the effect on society of a work of literature was as important as the literature’s production and content. Second, in philosophical hermeneutics, Gadamer developed his notion of the “effective history” of a text. To Gadamer, an individual’s interpretation cannot be all that a text can mean, for one’s interpretation is a complement of the interpretation of other readers. Third, there arose a goal of formulating a history of literature in terms of the reception of texts in order to systematize how texts were evaluated. The major proponent of this development, Hans Jauss, described the concept as the “aesthetics of reception.” Finally, the ideas of the structuralists whose formalism maintained that the text has a stable structure that is unrelated to the author and reader. Indeed, all four of these developments evoked the reaction that involves the three reader-focused method(s) of

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<sup>12</sup> John Poirier, “Some Detracting Considerations for Reader-Response Theory,” *CBQ* 62 (2000): 250.

<sup>13</sup> John Barton, “Thinking about Reader-Response Criticism,” 147.

<sup>14</sup> Bernard Lategan, “Reader Response Theory,” *ABD* 5:626.

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interpretation - “conservative,” “moderate,” and “liberal” - known as RRC.<sup>15</sup> These three methodologies for deriving meaning will now be focused upon.

### **Role of the Author in Reader-Response Criticism**

The role of the author is the focal point of “conservative” RRC. In this methodology, the reader considers meaning to be what the author intends in the text he or she has written. Thus, it is important to understand more about the author. In his essay “Who is “the Reader” in Reader Response Criticism?” Robert Fowler suggested there were two types of authors. The first is the “real author” or the “living flesh and blood person” who actually wrote the text. The second is an “implied author” or the image of his or herself created by the “real author” in order to communicate their story.<sup>16</sup> Regardless of which author is behind the text, it is their intentions that “conservative” RRC considers to be the meaning of the text. Ironically—and historically—the thought that the aim of interpretation is to understand the intentions of the author goes back to Friedrich Schleiermacher, who is considered the father of liberal theology.<sup>17</sup>

In the contemporary context, “conservative” RRC is championed by scholars like Eric Hirsch who consider the intention of the author to be the stable and objective meaning of a text.<sup>18</sup> Implicit in Hirsch’s assessment is the idea that meaning or the interpretation of a text is not a subjective undertaking. Thus, individual readers cannot assign their perceived interpretations to texts, for the meaning or the author’s intent cannot be influenced by the reader’s personal feelings, prejudices, or interpretations.

John Poirier can also be considered a “conservative” reader-response critic. In his essay, “Some Detracting Considerations for Reader-Response Theory,” he wrote to reveal what he believed to be “significant problems” with the reasoning of “radical” or liberal RRC. To him, “a text inscribes its author’s purpose,” and “a text originates as a conventional register of an author’s intentions.”<sup>19</sup> Therefore, Poirier concluded that liberal RRC does not convey the true meaning of a text—the author does.

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<sup>15</sup> Kevin Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text*, 27.

<sup>16</sup> Robert Fowler, “Who is “the Reader” in Reader Response Criticism?” *Semeia* 31 (1985): 10.

<sup>17</sup> Anthony Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 49.

<sup>18</sup> Eric Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, 5.

<sup>19</sup> John Poirier, “Some Detracting Considerations for Reader-Response Theory”, 250, 253.

But there are also opponents of “conservative” RRC. For example, William Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley argued that “the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art.”<sup>20</sup> Vanhoozer rightly suggested the two critics based their argument on four “intentional fallacies.”<sup>21</sup> The first is the “fallacy of relevancy”—authorial intent is irrelevant for all purposes. Second, the “fallacy of transparency”—consciousness is not transparent to itself—this attacked “conservative” reader-response critics like Hirsch who maintained that authorial meaning is the one that is in their consciousness. Third, the “fallacy of identity”—author’s intention cannot be identified with what is mentally conveyed in the text. Finally, the “fallacy of objectivity”—the “objective” author cannot be separated from his or her “subjective” environment. The two scholars seem to have overstated themselves by saying that the author’s intention is not available, because readers are able to know what author’s intend. This can be seen in texts where the author explicitly states his or her intentions. For example, this paper’s purpose is to discuss RRC.<sup>22</sup> And, one should not assume that this author’s conscious purpose was not intended because of subjective influences. Otherwise, the author is irrelevant.

A second opponent of “conservative” RRC was Northrop Frye. He insisted that it is “illegitimate” for a reader to ask, “what did the author mean by this?” He did so for two main reasons. First, the reader can never know what the author intended, and second, one should not assume that the author knew what he intended.<sup>23</sup> Frye seems to have borrowed his objections to “conservative” RRC from Wimsatt and Beardsley, so the previous objections to their arguments apply here as well.

Finally, Jacques Derrida suggested that it is an illusion to think the author’s voice is authoritative, and the text represents the author’s mind. For the author is a subjective mythical figure of the readers mind.<sup>24</sup> As a result, Vanhoozer rightly commented that Derrida’s “deconstruction” of the role of the author undoes any chance that the intent of

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<sup>20</sup> William Wimsatt, and Monroe Beardsley, “The intentional Fallacy,” in Wimsatt’s *the Verbal Icon: Studies in the meaning of Poetry* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1954), 3.

<sup>21</sup> Kevin Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text*, 82–84.

<sup>22</sup> See purpose statement in section 1, line 7 of p. 1. Whether or not I accomplished my purpose is another story.

<sup>23</sup> Northrop Frye, “Literary Criticism,” in *The Aims and Methods of Scholarship in Modern Languages and Literatures* (ed. James Thorpe; New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1963), 59.

<sup>24</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 3.

the author can be the object of interpretation.<sup>25</sup> Derrida seemed to have assumed that a person's—specifically the author—ontology and epistemology are based on the perceived interpretation of others. That may be why Derrida's "deconstruction" has been considered "the single most radical development in hermeneutical theory."<sup>26</sup> Hermeneutics is the art and science of interpreting and understanding texts.

In light of the opposition and support for "conservative" RRC, one can conclude that the role of the author in "conservative" reader-response criticism is to give meaning, bring stability and objectivity, as well as inscribe his or her purpose to a text. However, the author's intentions should be objective, relevant, transparent and be identified with the text. The role of the "moderate" reader-response critics in the derivation of meaning will now be discussed.

### **Role of the Text in Reader-Response Criticism**

The role of the text and reader are focused upon in "moderate" RRC. For "moderate" reader response critics, meaning is said to be derived from both the text and the reader. This method of interpretation is considered to "provide liberating insight" into the interpretive process without giving in to extreme relativism.<sup>27</sup> For, "moderate" RRC arbitrates between the notions that the text has a particular meaning and that the text has a plurality of meanings.<sup>28</sup> However, since the role of the reader in RRC will be focused on below, this section will mainly discuss the role of the text in RRC. And before focusing on the role of the text, "the text" needs to be defined.

What is the "text?" various definitions have been suggested. On the one hand, Paul Ricoeur says a text is "a discourse fixed by writing."<sup>29</sup> Thus, a text can be either verbal or written communication. And Poirier suggests that a text is "a conventional register of an author's intentions."<sup>30</sup> On the other hand, Derrida concludes that a text is "the idea of a totality, finite or infinite, of the signifier."<sup>31</sup> And "a differential network, a fabric of

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<sup>25</sup> Kevin Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text*, 74.

<sup>26</sup> Richard Palmer, "Hermeneutics," in *Contemporary Philosophy*. Guttorm Fløistad (ed.). (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1981), 2:470.

<sup>27</sup> Robin Parry, "Reader-Response Criticism," 660.

<sup>28</sup> Robin Parry, "Reader-Response Criticism," 659.

<sup>29</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 26. See also, Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, ed. and trans. By John Thompson (New York, NY: Cambridge university Press, 1981), 145.

<sup>30</sup> John Poirier, "Some Detracting Considerations for Reader-Response Theory", 253.

<sup>31</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 18.

traces, referring endlessly to something other than itself.”<sup>32</sup> In other words, Derrida thinks a text is considered—by Western society—to be the source of meaning because it is an objective source of what one needs to know. This understanding of “text” led Derrida to his “deconstructionist” method of interpretation. Furthermore, Ronald Barthes sees “text” as a “metaphor” which does not contain the author’s intentions, and is “an irreducible plurality.”<sup>33</sup> For Barthes then, a text is subjective and can be interpreted in a variety of ways.

Now, concerning the role of the text in RRC, various ‘moderate’ reader-response critics have offered their thoughts. To begin, Wimsatt and Beardsley state that the text is “a verbal entity that functions nicely on its own.”<sup>34</sup> To them, meaning can be ascertained by seeing how words were used, and the textual structure is the source of meaning.

Second, Wolfgang Iser declared that “the text represents a potential effect that is realized in the reading process.”<sup>35</sup> Thus, the text does not contain meaning. Rather, meaning is determined upon reading the structure of the text. For Iser, the text by itself cannot provide meaning, for it contains “gaps,” or material readers need to supplement in order to “complete” meaning.<sup>36</sup> Therefore, the text is a partner in meaning with the reader.

Third, Paul Ricoeur has said that “a text can mean all that it can mean,” but cannot mean anything a reader wants.<sup>37</sup> Because Ricoeur considers a text to be fixed, he does not think a reader can subjectively apply their perceived interpretation to it. Rather, the text should be explained “in terms of its internal relations, its structure.”<sup>38</sup> This notion seems to assume that a text’s internal structure is always intended or is an objective element toward interpretation. But, is that true? Do all authors write with “proper” grammatical structure? For this author, it is conceivable that the rules of grammar are not always followed in the writing of text.

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<sup>32</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Living On Border Lines,” in *Deconstruction and Criticism* (London: Routledge and Kegan, 1979), 83.

<sup>33</sup> Ronald Barthes, “From Work to Text,” in Josue Harari, ed., *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), 83–84.

<sup>34</sup> William Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley, “The intentional Fallacy”, 4.

<sup>35</sup> Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), ix.

<sup>36</sup> Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*, 68.

<sup>37</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 177.

<sup>38</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 152.

Finally, Barton, in contrast to Iser, arguing against “liberal” RRC, suggested that the text can provide meaning in and of itself.<sup>39</sup> For, “texts have definite meanings, which it is the business of the critic to discover.”<sup>40</sup> This opinion seems similar to a conservative RRC view because of the suggestion of a particular meaning in the text. However, meaning, for Barton, is not based on the author’s intent, but is derived from the structure of the text.

Despite the previous opinions, there are scholars who are opposed to the views or interpretive methodology of “moderate” reader-response critics. For example, though “moderate” RRC is anachronistic to Schleiermacher, the German theologian rules out any role the text may have in determining meaning. The “father of liberal theology” expressed that the meaning of a text is derived from the experience and thought of the author.<sup>41</sup> Second, Fish argues that there is nothing in the text to interpret—thereby ruling out a role for the text in the interpretive process.<sup>42</sup> Fish is a proponent of the “liberal” reader response critical view that it is the reader who is responsible for bringing meaning to a text. Finally, Poirier, the intentionalist, suggests that “moderate” RRC interprets a text as if it was a “causeless association of words,” and therefore eliminates the text’s only self-authentic function.<sup>43</sup> To Poirier, the role of the author is the function that gives meaning to a text.

In conclusion, most proponents of “moderate” reader-response criticism maintain that the role of the text in RRC is to provide a specific meaning through its internal structure. But, there is also the opinion that the text only provides “potential meaning,” and actual meaning is determined by the reader. The role of the reader in RRC will now be discussed.

### **Role of the Reader in Reader-Response Criticism**

The role of the reader is the focal point of “liberal” RRC. Indeed, in this method of interpreting literature, the reader plays the leading role over the author and the text in

<sup>39</sup> John Barton, “Thinking about Reader-Response Criticism”, 148.

<sup>40</sup> John Barton, “Thinking about Reader-Response Criticism”, 150.

<sup>41</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics: The Handwritten Manuscripts*, in *Friedrich Schleiermacher: Pioneer of Modern Theology*, ed. Keith Clements (London: Collins, 1987), 167.

<sup>42</sup> Stanley Fish, “Why No One’s Afraid of Wolfgang Iser,” in *Doing What Comes Naturally: Change, Rhetoric, and the Practice of Theory in Literary and Legal Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1989), 69–70.

<sup>43</sup> John Poirier, “Some Detracting Considerations for Reader-Response Theory”, 254.

determining the meaning of a text.<sup>44</sup> But, Fowler rightly asserted that there is some ambiguity as to who 'the reader' is."<sup>45</sup> In, his essay entitled "'Critic'/Reader,'" George Steiner suggest these ambiguities are in large part due to a failure to distinguish between the role of "the reader" and "the critic."<sup>46</sup> To him "the critic" is more than just a reader. On the one hand, a critic is "an expert" and part of an "interpretive community" that guides their work. The critic judges or gives his or her opinion about a text's worth and also attempts to evaluate all previous readings or interpretations of a text. Thus, Steiner considers the critic to be objective, that is, relative to the reader.<sup>47</sup> On the other hand, Steiner considers "the reader" to be subjective because he or she attempts to remove the distance between them and the text.<sup>48</sup> And even considers themselves to be the subject of their reading.<sup>49</sup>

In light of Steiner's work, Fowler seeks to clarify the ambiguities as to who "the reader" is by defining four types of readers. The first is the "critical reader." This reader is part of an "interpretive community" and remains "open enough to ask any question and to risk any judgment, even if it should mean repudiating."<sup>50</sup> Second, the "real reader" is the "flesh and blood person" who actually reads and is clearly outside of the text.<sup>51</sup> Third, the "implied reader" is the role or person that the text implies for the reader. This "implied reader" has the minimum attributes needed to understand the text.<sup>52</sup> Finally, the "ideal" or "informed reader" amplifies the "implied reader." He or she has linguistic and literary proficiency that enables acceptable interpretation of texts.<sup>53</sup> Regardless of which reader is involved with the text, it is their role or interpretation of a text that "liberal" reader-response critics consider to be the text's meaning.

Such "liberal" reader-response critics include Stanley Fish. For him, correct interpretation is determined by the "interpretive community" of readers, and there are

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<sup>44</sup> John Barton, "Thinking about Reader-Response Criticism," 147.

<sup>45</sup> Robert Fowler, "Who is "the Reader" in Reader Response Criticism?" 5.

<sup>46</sup> George Steiner, "'Critic'/Reader,'" *New Literary History* 10:423-52. Steiner rightly admits that "reading" and "criticism" overlaps, but still thinks it is important to understand both activities and how they relate to each other, 451.

<sup>47</sup> George Steiner, "'Critic'/Reader,'" 423-52.

<sup>48</sup> George Steiner, "'Critic'/Reader,'" 449.

<sup>49</sup> George Steiner, "'Critic'/Reader,'" 439.

<sup>50</sup> Robert Fowler, "Who is "the Reader" in Reader Response Criticism?" 10.

<sup>51</sup> Robert Fowler, "Who is "the Reader" in Reader Response Criticism?" 10. Bernard Lategan, "Reader Response Theory," 627.

<sup>52</sup> Robert Fowler, "Who is "the Reader" in Reader Response Criticism?", 10. Bernard Lategan, "Reader Response Theory", 626-627.

<sup>53</sup> Robert Fowler, "Who is "the Reader" in Reader Response Criticism?", 15.

as many meanings to a text as the amount of interpretations “interpretive communities” give to it.<sup>54</sup> Fish defined the “interpretive community” as “those who share interpretive strategies” for writing texts. To him, since the interpretive strategies existed before the text, they determine the text’s meaning.<sup>55</sup> And, the “interpretive community” is not objective because its perspective is to be critically read and interpreted. And their perspective is not subjective because it was derived through the agreed upon critical standards.<sup>56</sup> Therefore, an argument over objectivity or subjectivity of the interpretation is irrelevant.

Fish rightly commented that his interpretive methodology causes the role of the author, text and individual reader to become products of the interpretive community, because meaning is determined by communities of readers.<sup>57</sup> However, overstates when he suggests that there is no subjectivity in his way of deriving meaning. For, the subjectivity of an individual reader has been replaced by the subjectivity of individual “interpretive communities.” Therefore, Fowler is correct in his assessment that the source of meaning, for Fish, is the pre-existing presuppositions of an “interpretive community.”<sup>58</sup> For there are many “interpretive communities” and they do not all share the same method of interpretation. Thus, Fish is correct when he acknowledged that based on his interpretive methodology there is no “single correct interpretation” and reading becomes ideological and guided by special interests.

Another “liberal” reader-response critic is Norman Holland. Contrary to Fish, Holland considers meaning to be derived from individual readers. In his essay entitled “Transactive Criticism: Re-creation through identity,” Holland said, “we use the literary work . . . to replicate ourselves.”<sup>59</sup> By this Holland suggested that the psyche or an individual’s projection of themselves as a result of reading is the meaning of the text.<sup>60</sup> Thus, Holland’s “liberal” RRC is rightly considered to be “psycho-analytical.”<sup>61</sup>

As with other methodologies, “liberal” RRC has its detractors. For example, Thiselton assert that it could transform texts—like the Bible—into “idolatrous

<sup>54</sup> Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), 14.

<sup>55</sup> Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?*, 14.

<sup>56</sup> Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?*, 14.

<sup>57</sup> Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?*, 16–17.

<sup>58</sup> Robert Fowler, “Who is “the Reader” in Reader Response Criticism?” 14.

<sup>59</sup> Norman Holland, “Transactive Criticism: Re-creation through identity,” *Criticism* 18 (1976): 342.

<sup>60</sup> Robin Parry, “Reader-Response Criticism,” 659.

<sup>61</sup> Anthony Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, 529.

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instruments of self-affirmation.”<sup>62</sup> And it nullifies the purpose of hermeneutics, especially as it relates to the ability to dialog.<sup>63</sup> Thiselton was concerned that the ability to dialog would be hindered—thereby allowing particular view points to go unchecked. Barton is another detractor of “liberal” RRC. He declared that the method prevents a text from being able to surprise readers because “liberal” RRC brings its own meaning to the text.<sup>64</sup> Also, “liberal” RRC, reverts to an “authoritarianism” that dictates how texts like the Bible should be read.<sup>65</sup> These concerns appear similar to those of Thiselton, in terms of the concern for true objectivity in the interpretive process.

Not surprisingly, however, there are arguments for “liberal” RRC. For example, Fowler suggested that “liberal” RRC like that of Holland has necessarily brought attention to the richness of the reading experience and can make significant contribution to the interpretive process since there had not been previous monitoring of the reading process. Instead readers use to focus only on the meaning they derive after the text ended.<sup>66</sup> As a result of this contribution most readers are now critical readers throughout a text and are deriving significant meaning they otherwise would not have.<sup>67</sup>

Another argument for “liberal” RRC is that it “has affinities with the language of oral culture.”<sup>68</sup> Thus, it is a useful tool for studying oral narratives like those so prevalent in the Bible. This is because the “temporal” or “experiential” nature of this criticism is similar to that of the oral or spoken word—which is also temporal. However, the fact that things are experiential does not necessarily mean they interpret each other well, since the experiences take place at different times and contexts.

Based on the arguments above, one can conclude that the role of the reader in “liberal” RRC is to determine the meaning of a text. This can be accomplished as the reader removes the distance between his or herself and the text; become part of an “interpretive community”; or “replicate” themselves with the text.

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<sup>62</sup> Anthony Thiselton, *Promise of Hermeneutics*, 155.

<sup>63</sup> Anthony Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, 550.

<sup>64</sup> John Barton, “Thinking about Reader-Response Criticism,” 149.

<sup>65</sup> John Barton, “Thinking about Reader-Response Criticism,” 150.

<sup>66</sup> Robert Fowler, “Who is “the Reader” in Reader Response Criticism?” 19.

<sup>67</sup> “Most readers” here refer to those that are at least on the graduate level.

<sup>68</sup> Robert Fowler, “Who is “the Reader” in Reader Response Criticism?” 20.

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## CONCLUSION

In Conclusion, Reader-Response Criticism is a variety of interpretive methodologies in which the reader's role is to determine the meaning of a text. Whether its "conservative," "moderate" or "liberal" RRC, these ways of interpreting texts have their advantages and disadvantages. And current scholarship has not been able to conclusively demonstrate that one of these methods is to be preferred over the other. Thus, it seems that a reader-response critical approach that considers the advantages of all three forms should be beneficial towards the derivation of meaning from a text.

Such an approach could be applied as follows: the current reader consider that an author often writes with a clear agenda that should be reckoned with. And, the author may have purposefully adopted a particular grammatical structure for their text in an attempt to convey meaning. Further, since communication is at least a dialog, the original reader, as well as the present reader's perspective should be assessed. For, these readers cannot be separated from the influence of their context—which includes how their interpretive communities affect the way meaning is perceived. This model reader-response critical approach suggests that the best way to derive the meaning of a text is for each reader to be a "critical reader."

One may ask, "how does this model compare with the present standing or scholarly view of RRC?" Well, the present standing of RRC suggests it is a majority position. This is because Vanhoozer said RRC was "an emerging consensus."<sup>69</sup> And Barton stated, "any who dissent from it [RRC] are at one and the same time showing their lack of interpretative sophistication."<sup>70</sup> Unfortunately, Barton and Vanhoozer did not distinguish between the various methods in RRC. But, because traditional scholarship—which they represent—has not focused upon the role of the author, one cannot make an objective comparison between traditional RRC and the model approach presented above. But, because today's readers continuously ask, "what does the author mean?" Deconstruction of texts is rampant; and readers continue to replicate themselves with texts, it can be inferred that the role of the author, text and reader in the present RRC is subjective while their roles in the model approach is equally valid.

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<sup>69</sup> Kevin Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text*, 10.

<sup>70</sup> John Barton, "Thinking about Reader-Response Criticism," 147.

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