Approaches to reading practices

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This paper provides an account of various reading practices generated from a range of theoretical understandings about how meaning is made. It is offered as a useful starting point to begin exploring different ways of reading texts, and becoming familiar with various schools of thought and related reading practices.

The many approaches to reading practices may be simplified and categorised as:

- author-centred approaches

- text-centred approaches

- reader-centred approaches

- world-context-centred approaches.

The different approaches each have their own theories, assumptions and values, and because they tend to emphasise author, text, reader or world-context, there is correspondingly less emphasis on the other three. For example, in the world-context-centred approaches the focus on socio-critical aspects of meaning-making may lead to less emphasis on particular textual features or on the variability and individuality of readers' responses.

However, even when reading predominantly within one approach, readers draw on elements of other approaches. For instance, readers may have a legitimate interest in reading the autobiography or biography of an author and drawing information about the writer's life and times into their reading of his or her literary works. This need not mean subscribing to the *intentional fallacy* of reducing meaning to what the author presumably intended. Nor need it mean overemphasising the author's originality or personality at the expense of acknowledging the historical, cultural and social forces which shaped that writer and conditioned the forms that the work could have taken, or the ways it could have been interpreted by readers at that time. Similarly, it is legitimate for readers to concentrate on aspects of form, such as the structuring of a narrative, though they may do so from within a different approach — perhaps because they are interested in the forms of *the stories by which a culture lives.*

The characteristic emphases of the various approaches, therefore, enable exploration in a systematic way of how literary texts may be read and what meanings can be generated by using the theoretical concepts and reading strategies associated with the specific approaches. In exploring the reading practices associated with particular approaches, it is useful to question all aspects of the approaches, especially those which have been challenged and have lost broad acceptance. To do this requires a familiarity with the approaches in their historical form and an awareness of their characteristic emphases and concerns. Understandings of contemporary practices should enable readers to examine their own assumptions about texts and reading, evaluate these, widen their repertoire of reading strategies, and develop a meta-knowledge of textual and reading practices.

An overview of the approaches

The different approaches are represented in simplified form in the table, followed by a brief description of the different reading approaches, including historical background. Contemporary interpretations and developments of the approaches are also described.

The historical and contemporary accounts for each of the approaches are necessarily brief and selective, and are therefore open to challenge by other accounts. The snapshots offered should therefore be taken only as a starting point; they are neither definitive nor sufficient in themselves.

The table gives an introductory overview of the approaches from a largely historical perspective, providing a clear but necessarily artificial differentiation. Contemporary perspectives on approaches are described more fully in the sections that follow the table.

Each column gives a snapshot of the approaches. The bold-line box identifies the characteristic emphases; the other cells in that column show what follows logically from those emphases for the remaining aspects. For example, the bold box of the text-centred approaches shows how the sufficiency of the text itself is emphasised. It follows therefore, that the author's role disappears from view, since this is no longer the focus of the reading.

A snapshot of the different approaches

	Author-centred approaches	Text-centred approaches	Reader-centred approaches	World-context-centred approaches
Author's role	• generates text • guarantees quality • themes related to life • biographical approaches	• irrelevant because of intentional fallacy	• author becomes implied author in the text through the relationship between the implied author and the reader; text is activated in the reading	• discursively and ideologically constituted (discourses construct the author and text)
Text, nature of	• reflects and/or refracts life (and times) • bears marks of authoring through language choices	• the place where meaning is found — emphasis on structural whole (literariness) — narratology, New Critics theories, etc. • close scrutiny of language	• text as a personal and shared resource, its value lies not in itself but in its capacity to generate a personal response • text is unstable in that it is a container of multiple readings • language knowledge: text, genre, codes and conventions	• text is vehicle for and/or a repository of cultural assumptions, values, preoccupations, etc. to be maintained, challenged • language knowledge: representations of reality, establishment of reader roles and relationships
Reader role, values	• recognises links between author's life and text • recognises textual features as supporting author's intentions/ visions	• competent reader knows how to appreciate textual qualities as contributing to aesthetic/thematic whole	• reader actively makes meaning by bringing knowledge to text — experiential, psychological, intertextual, etc. • acknowledgment of a range of possible multiple readings	• reader is constructed by socio-cultural, historical and political contexts • reader's role, whether you agree or disagree, is to understand the cultural assumptions; focus of interest on *whose interests are served* • reader's role is to be reflexive, conscious of the ideologies
World context	• author interprets world/times, e.g. valued themes, interpretations that persist across time	• text stands apart from the world as a *verbal icon*	• different contexts for readers and texts encourage different readings, make different readings available	• context constitutes: ideologies, discourses, institutions, practices, texts

The table zooms in on the basic concepts and the intrinsic differences of the approaches in their historical forms. It helps to develop an understanding of the contemporary reading practices of the approaches. It may be that readers will recognise that aspects of reader-centred and world-context-centred approaches provide tools for challenging assumptions that underpin other approaches, e.g. by showing how the author, text and reader shaped and are shaped by their socio-cultural contexts.

Author-centred approaches

Historical

Dominant medieval notions of authorship entailed a belief in the authority of the *auctores* or custodians of ancient knowledge. An author's originality was not especially esteemed; rather it was the skill involved in rewriting older sources that mattered. In this homage lay the author's claim to be heard. However, more modern understandings of authorship emerged in the eighteenth century, when the notion that the author's words were completely original and his (or her) copyrighted 'property' gained acceptance (Pease 1995, pp. 105–117). This view of authorship was strengthened by eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century notions of individualism and creativity celebrated by the Romantic movement, and was more common in Anglo-American circles.

During the nineteenth century, some English social critics identified a number of causes of what they viewed as destabilising social change. Among these was the rise of science in the era of the Industrial Revolution, and the apparent decline of religion as the central moral force in English society. Matthew Arnold, for instance, was concerned about the post-Industrial fragmentation of English society and the consequent potential for unrest. In *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) he advocated a guided study of selected works of literature by great authors, believing that these had the power to unify the general population.

This ethically based approach was subsequently vigorously pursued in England, in various forms, over a number of decades. This is evident in the work of AC Bradley (1988, *Shakespearean Tragedy*), FR Leavis (1964, *The Great Tradition*) and with Denys Thompson (1964, *Culture and the Environment*), QD Leavis (1989, *Collected Essays*), and in the journal *Scrutiny* (1932–1953)*.

In their view, the author was a specially gifted individual who expressed himself (or more rarely herself) in unique works of literary art. Hence the text was revered as the message of the *author-God* (Barthes 1978), whose intention determined its meaning. As an individual specially gifted with rare insights into the human condition, the author was seen as transcending his or her own culture. The *high moral seriousness* of these authors informed their work and guaranteed its quality: their poems, plays or novels offered insights into the universal moral dilemmas of humanity. Essential to communicating this vision was the aesthetic quality of the work, realised by skilled, artistic use of language.

According to Arnold and others, authors not only transcended their times; paradoxically they also performed a cultural function by advocating a common set of the *best* moral values, which would promote social stability and national pride. Literature was seen as an instrument of social stability, not of social change.

Contemporary

Contemporary author-centred approaches no longer regard the author as the ultimate arbiter of the text's meaning. The older view was first challenged in 1946 by Wimsatt and Beardsley (cited in Richter 1998), who called this the *intentional fallacy*. The text was not owned by the author, they argued; rather, it is 'detached from the author at birth and goes about the world beyond his [sic] power to intend about it or control it'. That is, an author's stated purpose cannot determine all the legitimate readings that may be made of his/her text. According to Wimsatt and Beardsley, the author's intentions are, strictly speaking, irrelevant to acts of interpretation of the text: even if the author explains his/her own work, this is merely one reading among others. Moreover, as in the case of Shakespeare, external evidence of an author's meanings and intentions is not always available.

In older author-centred approaches it seemed possible to gain access to the author's mind, either as an individual or as the spirit of the age, through the words of the text. However, if there is no single 'message' but rather a series of different, even competing meanings, none can be identified simply with the author. A further challenge to the notion of authorial presence has been the introduction of the concept of the *implied author* (Booth 1983). This term refers to the imagined figure of the author created by the reader out of hints in the work. The implied author may be quite different from the historical writer.

Another issue has to do with the explanation and justification of the text's meaning in the light of biographical or autobiographical information. This older view was founded on the notion that the author has a personal set of experiences which find expression in the work. The writer's self was understood to be a unified and unique individual who was the source of the meanings they made, meanings which existed before and beyond language. However, biographies and autobiographies, like other kinds of information about the author, are merely texts too, which are also open to interpretation. For all these reasons Barthes (1978, pp. 142–48) argued for the 'death of the author', which he said was necessary to allow for the 'birth of the reader' — and the multiplicity of interpretations that readers can generate.

In his essay 'What is an author?' written in 1969 (cited in Bouchard 1977) Foucault identified a number of *author functions* which still persist in the ways readers approach a text. First is *classification*: the name of the author can be used to classify texts according to genre, period, style and so on, e.g. a 'Dickensian text' or a 'Danielle Steele text'. Second is *attribution*: the name of the author can be attached to certain concepts, ideologies or themes, e.g. Darwinism, an Orwellian world. Third is *valuation*: the name of certain (canonical) authors is still taken to be a guarantee of the aesthetic and ethical quality of the work attributed to those authors. (The traditional canon consisting largely of white, middle-class, educated authors has in recent years been challenged and expanded.)

Multimodal texts also bring challenges to the notion of authorship, when teams contribute in various modes to the production of a text (e.g. films, hypermedia poems, computer games).

Author and text

According to historical approaches to the author, texts were words on a page that had been selected by an individual author writing under inspiration. The value of a text was determined according to how well it conveyed the author's thoughts and feelings as they explored and offered insights into the universal truths and the moral dilemmas of the human condition. Thus the words on the page were taken to be a mirror of real life, filtered through the author's consciousness (Moon 1990). This relationship between the author and the text is now considered problematic, for the reasons outlined above.

Author and reader

Formerly the reader's role was to interpret the author's intended message about the world, and the value of reading was in how the reader was brought into an intimate relationship with the author's mind. The greatness of literature was judged by the reader according to the worth of its message; how well, aesthetically, that message was conveyed; and how closely the author's perceived intentions aligned with prevailing beliefs and value systems. The relationship between reader and author has now shifted, and the concept that authorial authority limits and delegitimises readers' interpretations has now been challenged.

Author and world-context

According to a more historical approach, the world of the text reflected universal truths about the human condition and nature in general. Thus, while authors wrote about specific times, certain values, beliefs and traits transcended the particular subject matter of the literary text. However, although these values and beliefs were held to be natural and universal, they have more recently been recognised as representing the views of groups in society which had the greatest influence. It is now widely understood that it is not possible to *read off* the author's life and times directly from the text. Instead, it may be possible to trace how competing discourses of the times in which the author wrote are played out in the text.

Reading practices generated by contemporary author-centred approaches

The following activities are generated from contemporary author-centred approaches because they take the author as the problematic to be investigated, and may include contexts as well as texts.

Activities suitable for earlier in the course

The following activities involve the application of reading practices based on Foucault's *author functions*. These may be appropriate for students to attempt earlier in the course.

- *Classification*: Read Nick Earls' *48 Shades of Brown* and explore the notion that Earls is a writer whose works are contemporary, set in South-East Queensland, focused through a young male protagonist with particular concerns and attitudes, told in a self-deprecatingly humorous style, and so on.

- *Attribution*: Read a Hitchcock-style thriller and identify the elements that characterise it as being akin to Hitchcock's work.

- *Valuation*: Read a recently written novel that offers a sequel or an alternative to the work of a canonised author, such as Jane Austen, and conforms to her style, e.g. the novels of Joan Aiken, Julia Barrett or Emma Tennant.

Activities suitable for later in the course

Other activities that involve the application of reading practices generated from the contemporary author-centred approach may be more suitable for later in the course, e.g.:

- Take a cultural studies approach to the commodification of the author by selecting any contemporary author who is recognised as a *brand name* (e.g. Peter Carey, Patricia Cornwall, Bryce Courtenay or Stephenie Meyer) and investigate how their expectations of the text and their reading experience are shaped by marketing, book launches, signings, literary lunches, literary festival appearances, book reviews, book store promotions (including displays), public readings and the like.

- Investigate and challenge the notion of a single author in 'blueprint' fiction, such as *The Baby-sitters Club* (AM Martin).

- Inquire into the responsibility of authors for their words, in, for example, Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* or Phillip Gwynne's *Deadly, Unna?* (in screenplay form for the film *Australian Rules*).

- Problematise the authenticity of the text as guaranteed by the identity of the author, by investigating the cases such as Helen Darville/Demidenko, or Mudrooroo/Colin Thomas Johnson.

- Account for the fluctuating popularity of a particular author by tracing, for example, how the film versions of Shakespearean plays and nineteenth-century novels by writers such as Jane Austen have made the original texts more accessible and appealing to contemporary audiences and created new markets for these texts.

- Analyse biographical constructions of the author, for example of Sylvia Plath, with reference to her autobiographical novel, *The Bell Jar.*

- Analyse the reconstruction of an author as a character, for example Charles Dickens in Peter Carey's *Jack Maggs*, or William Shakespeare in *Shakespeare in Love.*

- Inquire into the 'selves' in an autobiography (i.e. the experiencing self, the narrating self, and the narrated self — the character) and the concept of selfhood culturally available to the reader.

Text-centred approaches

Historical

A focus on the text was characteristic of a number of reading approaches in the twentieth century. In the 1920s, for instance, the school of Russian Formalists argued that literature operates by defamiliarising the everyday through its language and form. They systematically studied those devices of literary forms which are distinguished from (or foregrounded against) ordinary language use.

The text-centred approach that had most influence on the practices of literary education was the 'new' criticism, which was current from the 1930s to the 1960s in Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States. Common to the various and sometimes diverse theories of critics like IA Richards (1978, *Practical Criticism*), Cleanth Brooks (1975, *The Well-wrought Urn*), WK Wimsatt (1967, *The Verbal Icon*), and John Crowe Ransom (1979, *The New Criticism*) was an idealised respect for the literary work itself.

Their argument was that the meaning of a work of literature was to be found in the *words on the page*, not in the author or in the reader. And since the text's verbal structure was stable, so too its meaning was very stable — independent of or *transcending* any changes in the social and cultural contexts of readers. That is, the elements of the text's language and form worked together to make the *true* meaning, which did not depend on outside factors. A literary text was autonomous — complete in itself — and all the parts of that literary text worked together to create a harmonious whole.

The text's content could not be separated from its form: to try to convey that content alone was to commit the *heresy of paraphrase*. The text's meaning therefore had to be deduced from closely examining its language and structure — its grammar, syntax, rhetorical and formal patterns. It

was for this reason that figurative language (metaphor, symbol and the like) was seen as intrinsic to the meaning rather than simply decoration.

The New Critics advocated *close reading* and *practical criticism* — academically rigorous techniques for critical analysis. They claimed that such disciplined reading was *objective* or *impersonal* — very different from the impressionistic appreciation of older critics or the very personal responses of less-well-instructed readers. Their scrutiny of literary language led these critics to privilege poetry as the ultimate form of literature and to value those poems that were richly complex and marked by irony, tension, paradox and ambivalence — poems which (according to the New Critics' reading) held these in balance and therefore resolved them.

The New Critics denied that the function and value of literary texts was closely bound up with social, cultural and political forces. Instead, they argued that the main value of literature was to resolve moral, psychological and spiritual dilemmas and ambiguities: to reconcile tensions between, for instance, love and hate, thought and feeling, the universal and the particular, the physical and the metaphysical, and so on. These dualities were held together in a kind of balance by the unifying power of metaphor and symbol. Hence literature had moral significance because of its capacity for *order* and *harmony*, and its *transcending of the local and historical*.

Another significant historical text-centred approach was structuralism. This began as a linguistic theory developed by Saussure in the early decades of the twentieth century. In the 1960s a version of structuralism surfaced as an approach to literary texts. This theory regarded the forms of literature as being akin to the structures of language, and individual works as elements in a larger system of literature. A range of theorists, from Propp to Greimas, Todorov, Genette, Levi Strauss, Jakobson and Barthes, focused in various ways on the broader systems or structures of meaning through which texts were organised. In their analysis of prose narratives (narratology), some explored recurrent patterns and motifs, identifying narrative structures which they took to be universal. Others related a particular text to the conventions of the genre to which it belonged and traced its intertextual connections. Some structuralists also interpreted all of culture as *systems of signs* and undertook a semiotic analysis of the systematic patterning and structuring of cultural texts.

Contemporary

While the New Critics and structuralists had looked for coherence or system and thus unity in texts, contemporary text-based approaches focus instead on incoherence, contradictions and disunities in texts. Therefore, contemporary text-centred approaches overlap with some of the theoretical concerns and reading practices of reader-centred and world-context-centred approaches. Practitioners of contemporary text-centred approaches, including some post-structuralists and deconstructionists, *harass* the text to make it reveal what it tries to conceal. They show the ways in which the text comes undone, or deconstructs itself, by identifying its gaps, silences and contradictions. And they press the text until it yields multiple meanings. For example, they focus on the binary oppositions which the structuralists had taken to be stable and distinct, but which post-structuralists assert are not mutually exclusive. The *privileged* (preferred or central) member of the binary pair depends on the other, *marginal*, member but needs to deny this dependency to maintain its superiority. According to post-structuralists there are other ways too in which language and texts are unstable or indeterminate, i.e. language cannot be pinned down to a single, fixed meaning; there will always be other meanings beyond those which are dominant or invited. This excess of meaning can never be permanently repressed but serves to destabilise any claims that the text is unitary.

More recent approaches to semiotics, unlike earlier, structuralist approaches, focus on the production, reception and circulation of meaning in all its forms and contexts. That is, contemporary social semiotics takes meaning-making to be a social and therefore political activity. Meanings are in part made through social systems of signs, including forms of dress and other cultural artefacts such as cars or cola drinks, as well as through speech, writing and gestures. A *sign* is made up of a *signifier,* which points to something other than itself, and a *signified,* the thing referred to by the signifier. For example, the letters KFC (the signifier) are understood to mean ready-cooked chicken pieces and their accompaniments (the signified). People make meanings through selecting items (or signs) from a sign-category and combining them with other items — either conforming to or subverting established rules, or codes. 'By exploring the social meaning of these selections and combinations, we can establish a relationship between the text and certain cultural beliefs and values. To be fully useful, this kind of analysis should also give some consideration to the different readings which might be produced from the text' (Moon 2001, p. 139).

Earlier, structuralist forms of narratology have also undergone changes. Narratologists now do not seek to apply some general set of structures as if all narratives are essentially alike. Although they still examine those aspects of a narrative which are termed *fabula*, story and text (the *fabula* is the chronological order of the unfolding of events; the *story* is the way the events are presented, e.g. by dialogue, description, flashbacks, etc.), and they still analyse the role of the narrator and the processes of narration, they now acknowledge that these are the means by which readers make their interpretations within particular cultural constraints. Accordingly, a contemporary text-centred approach to narratology will entail some aspects of a reader-centred approach; thus, narratologists argue that 'it is only once we know how a text is structured that the reader's share — and responsibility — [in making meaning] can be clearly assessed' (Bal 1997, p. 11). They also assert that 'political and ideological criticism cannot but be based on insights into the ways texts produce these political effects' (Bal 1997, p. 13). Hence the tools of narratology may be particularly useful in tracing how invited readings have been managed by the text.

Text and author

In the New Critics' text-centred approach, information about the author's attitudes, intentions, cultural and social interests and the like was taken to be irrelevant and *extra-literary*. To focus on these aspects of the author's intentions could not help to determine the meaning of the text or its value. The earlier belief that it could was termed the *intentional fallacy*. Instead, it was argued that the text had an independent existence and the author did not have the power to determine its meaning. Similarly, in structuralism the author was deemed irrelevant to analysis. Practitioners drawing on a contemporary text-centred approach continue to direct their attention away from the author as a historical, 'real' figure or as the originator of the text and arbiter of its meaning; instead, they focus on the role of the text in shaping interpretation.

Text and reader

According to historical text-centred approaches, especially that of the New Critics, well-disciplined readers were receptive to the words on the page; they were impartial and even self-effacing. The reader's experiences and ideologies had nothing to do with the text's meaning. If readers let their personal, emotional responses intrude into the reading they would be guilty of the *affective fallacy*. To structuralists the role of the readers was to decode the text and this depended on their *literary competence* (according to Culler 1988). In contemporary practices, whether post-structuralist, semiotic or narratological, there is more recognition of the role of the reader in acts of interpretation.

Text and world-context

The New Critics deliberately set aside the historical and social contexts of texts, authors and readers; the only historical information which was accepted concerned the original meanings of words. The world created by the text was taken to be a self-contained alternative to the 'real' world with its social and political turmoil and its industrial ugliness. 'Though cultures have changed poems remain and explain' as permanent and valuable artefacts, Wimsatt and Beardsley argued (cited in Richter 1998).

Literary structuralists looked for recurrent patterns that persisted across cultures rather than focusing on elements specific to certain times and places. Current social semiotics is often used within cultural studies approaches. Similarly, deconstructionist tools are often used by post-colonial and feminist critics, among others. In both cases, these analytical tools are put to use for social and political ends.

Reading practices generated by contemporary text-centred approaches

These contemporary practices are text centred in so far as they focus on the structuring of texts and the textual means by which specific meanings are made and readers' expectations and desires are managed. Such practices do not necessarily assume that texts are unified, organic or coherent; they may by contrast examine the contradictions and incoherence in a text.

Activities suitable for earlier in the course

Genres

- Read detective fiction to focus on the development of new norms and conventions within the genre, e.g. the development of the female investigator who is not simply a replication of the male detective.

Narrative structures

- Read a text with a first-person narrator and examine the ways in which this narrative viewpoint *focalises* the reader's attention, e.g. *Great Expectations* (Dickens), in which the perspective of the younger Pip is presented through the narrative voice of his older self; or *The Great Gatsby* (F Scott Fitzgerald), in which Nick as a peripheral character frames and focalises the reader's attention on Gatsby, Tom and Daisy.

- Read a text focusing on the sequencing of events through flashbacks or flashforwards as ways of foregrounding themes and making a link between cause and effect across events widely separated in chronological time (e.g. the film *Memento* reverses the forward movement of chronological narration; Jessica Anderson's *Tirra Lirra by the River* uses retrospection and introspection as narrative devices).

- Read a text with a subplot and analyse how that subplot echoes, subverts and/or comments on the main plot (e.g. *King Lear*; or the embedded tale in Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin*).

Activities suitable for later in the course

Other contemporary approaches, suitable for later in the course, could include:

- Analyse the competing meanings within a text which make it impossible to arrive at a stable, final, complete meaning, e.g. in Ruth Prawer Jhabvala's *Heat and Dust*, the binary oppositions between the white British Raj and their Indian subjects; or the class oppositions in RL Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*

- Examine the gaps and the silences in a text which admit other, marginal readings, e.g. the contradictory attitudes to the working class in Dickens' *Hard Times*, or in Branagh's film *Henry V*.

Reader-centred approaches

Historical

A different understanding of texts is possible when reader-centred approaches are used. These approaches, as a reaction against text-centred approaches of the time, came to prominence in the 1960s and 70s. Diverse critics such as Jonathon Culler (1988, *Structuralist Poetics*), Stanley Fish (1980, *Is There a Text in This Class?*), ED Hirsch (1976, *The Aims of Interpretation*), David Bleich (1978, *Subjective Criticism*), Norman Holland (1968, *The Dynamics of Literary Response*), and especially Wolfgang Iser (1978, *The Act of Reading*) and Louise Rosenblatt (1978, *The Reader, the Text, the Poem*) shared an emphasis on the reader's central role in the meaning-making process.

This emphasis was part of a larger movement recognising that *the observer is part of the field of observation* and that knowledge is not independent of the knower; instead both knowledge and the knower are socially constructed. This was underpinned by *hermeneutics*, the branch of philosophy that concerned itself with interpretation. Over time and among the critics mentioned above, there were shifts of emphasis: some focused on the part the text plays in constraining interpretations by the *competent* or informed reader; others focused on the experiential and personal; others foregrounded the psychological or the social.

A focus on reader-centred approaches was particularly attractive to teachers who followed a personal growth pedagogy (see Dixon 1967) as it enabled literature to be used as a resource for personal growth to maturity. That is, this pedagogy was seen as encouraging readers to relate their own experiences to others' and to make connections to others' worlds, thus expanding their horizons. It was widely followed by primary and secondary English teachers in the 1970s and 1980s, so that a reader-centred approach came to be seen as the *natural* and unproblematic way to talk about texts. This early form of reader-response practice foregrounded the uniqueness of the individual's engagement with the text based on personal experience. Students were asked to empathise with characters and situations and to compare these with their own lives.

An important difference between reader-centred approaches to textual analysis and those offered by the preceding two approaches to reading (in their historical form) was that meaning was no longer seen as being fixed, that is, as being locked inside the text. Instead, in reader-centred approaches, meaning was seen as being produced by the reader.

Contemporary

By comparison with earlier practices, contemporary reader-centred approaches recognise the cultural experiences a reader brings to the text. Meanings are continually renegotiated in the interactions between text and reader throughout the entire reading process. Readers bring their knowledge, experiences, habits, expectations, beliefs and values to the transactions between text and reader. The knowledge, beliefs and expectations of readers change over time, and this leads to a shifting relation between readers and texts. This inevitably means that texts are received differently by readers at different historical moments: the *horizon of expectations* (Jauss 1982).

Textual elements set up an interpretive role for readers; when readers take up the position of the implied reader, they produce the text's invited meaning/s. Because the text is made out of fragments surrounded by blanks or gaps, readers are encouraged to fill in those gaps according

to the prompts established by the text. Experienced readers will know to fill in the gaps appropriately by drawing on their knowledge of genres and textual features. Such transactions produce an invited reading and the reader becomes the text's *implied reader*. This is more likely to occur when there is a close match between the experiences, values and understandings set up in the text and shared by the reader. Nevertheless, this approach does not lock readers into one invited reading. Multiple readings or meanings can be generated from the same text because of what each reader brings to that text.

This is not to suggest that a text can mean anything at all, since there are a number of elements that set bounds to possible or probable readings. One is the function of the implied reader, as already mentioned. Another is the working of the text, which not only stimulates the reader's responses but also guides these by confirming or changing expectations, organising the developing pattern of understanding and eliminating inappropriate associations.

Using reader-centred approaches, readers may read more than the text's invited meaning. For instance, they could disagree slightly with some aspect of the ideologies they see as being promoted by the text. In this case they produce an *alternative* reading rather in the manner suggested by Ricoeur (1984). Here readers have a double motivation in so far as they take up simultaneously a willingness to suspect and a willingness to listen to an invited reading. An alternative reading does not resist the text's ideologies outright. To do so would mean reading with resistant or oppositional reading practices, which mounts deeper challenges to the ideological and discursive positioning of the reader by the text.

A key point about a reader-centred approach to reading is the notion that different readers produce different readings of the same text. The same reader also could renegotiate their prior readings of a text on re-reading it. However, it is also important to note that although readers might produce what seems to be a reading that comes from a personal perspective, groups or communities of readers (interpretive communities) also produce readings that are similar because they emanate from related experiences (Fish 1980).

There are some overlaps between the contemporary reader-centred approach and a world-context centred approach through a concern with textual ideologies and discourses. The practices generated by reader-centred approaches enable readers to begin to challenge textual ideologies through examining (mis)matches between personal ideologies and those of the text (Thomson 1992). Reading practices generated from the world-context-centred approach allow more radical challenges to the text's invited readings, by facilitating a challenge to the text's cultural assumptions.

Reader and author

The *real* author outside the text is not a consideration here. Reader-centred approaches deny the validity of the perceived *authorial intention* as outlined in historical author-centred approaches. By contrast, readers in contemporary reader-centred approaches derive a sense of the author from the text and the text too creates a kind of authorial persona which is not necessarily identical with the narrator. This version of the author, constructed by the text (through choices of register variables and the like) and the reader, is the *implied author*. The narrator is the storytelling voice, whose viewpoint may be revealed as limited or unreliable.

Reader and text

In this approach the notion of text is interpreted more widely than in historical text- and author-centred approaches where the focus tended to be on canonical texts. This broader concept of texts includes a range of different genres, incorporating various modes and media. Many of these texts arise within popular culture and include, for example, advertisements, movies, television programs, computer games and electronic fictions. In historical reader-centred approaches, the reader's personal alignment with characters and events was a focus of study. In the contemporary approaches, competent or informed readers draw on their knowledge of genre and textual features in making meaning; readers are more alert to the role of textual details (such as literary devices, structural features) in shaping their responses to the text.

Reader and world-context

Some versions of a reader-centred approach give greater recognition than others to the social and cultural in the transactions between reader and text. As noted above, readers draw on aspects of their cultural repertoire to fill gaps left in the text. In some cases readers can easily slot into the role of the implied reader because their own ideologies are closely aligned with those of the text. This produces an *invited* reading. In other cases readers' beliefs and values may diverge somewhat from those offered in the text and so their responses produce *alternative* readings.

Reader-centred approaches go some way towards emphasising the social and cultural in meaning making, rather than taking on the more overtly political stance towards texts and reading practices of the world-context-centred approach. It recognises that readers bring their own ideologies to their transactions with the text even if they do not overtly challenge the text's position/s. Again there is clearly now some overlap between reader-centred and world-context-centred theoretical understandings and practices.

Reading practices generated by reader-centred approaches

A contemporary view sees continuing value in the emphases of reader-centred approaches because they recognise that texts are not stable, solid works with one determined meaning. The reader is essential to the whole business of meaning making.

Activities suitable for early in the course

Reader perspectives

Students read a particular text and account for their responses by drawing on any of the following overlapping perspectives as appropriate (Beach 1993). For example:

- In a *textual* perspective, how does knowledge of symbols, images and narrative structure help the reader to understand the characters, settings and events? Who is the implied author of the text, i.e. Who is the persona/s writing the text? (see Iser 1978). How might the text be read intertextually? (see Kristeva 1986). How might the use of particular points of view encourage the reader to take up some characters' or auto/biographical subjects' perspectives more than others?

- In an *experiential* perspective, how might the reader visualise images in the novel based on life experiences? Who are the implied readers for this text? Why might a reader take up, or reject the role of the invited or ideal reader? How and when might the reader fill the gaps left in the text (through life experiences, cultural assumptions and ideologies, and knowledge of genres and textual features)?

- In a *psychological* perspective, how might the reader's relationship to the text depend upon cognitive development and personality (see Bleich 1978 and Holland 1968)? How might the reader's mood have an impact on a reading of the text? How might the reader take up possibilities for identity development and reconceptualising subjectivities offered by the text?

- In a *social* perspective, how might the reader's purpose for reading affect the reader's response to the text? How might the social context in which the reading occurs link the reader to a particular interpretive community?

- In a *cultural* perspective, how might the ideologies readers are invited to accept in the text match or mismatch with their own? Why might this be so? Might readers at times read across texts? At what points could reading across the text become reading against the text, that is, move from an alternative to a resistant reading?

Implied reader

Students could explore the concept of the implied reader by reading with and/or across a text, for example, DH Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*.

Activities suitable for later in the course

Interpretive communities and horizon of expectations

- Investigate the readings of the same texts by two different interpretive communities (Fish 1980), for example, using the films *The Tracker*, or *Bowling for Columbine*, and accessing students from different schools, or intergenerational groups such as parents and students, or book club members, using email, chat rooms, face-to-face contact, or YouTube comments.

- Explore a work that has been rewritten or revised as a result of changing perceptions, beliefs and expectations of audiences. For example, Nahum Tate's version of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, or the original film *Apocalypse Now*, and the later director's cut *Apocalypse Now Redux*.

World-context-centred approaches

Historical

The key question for world-context-centred approaches is: 'Whose interests are served by representations of the world in texts?'

One of the early world-context-centred approaches was Marxist criticism, formalised in the 1920s, with its characteristic emphasis on structural class-based inequalities. To some of these theorists, texts directly reflected economic realities. For these critics, as a result, socially realistic writing, which explored or laid bare matters of class relations, was valued and advocated. Canonical texts were reinterpreted in class-based terms. The political and sociological emphasis of this *vulgar Marxism* was challenged by a more developed form of Marxist literary theory. It is represented by theorists such as Gramsci and Lukacs (1923). More recent Marxist writers whose work continues to be influential include Althusser (1971), Macherey (1978), Williams (1977), Jameson (1971) and Eagleton (1976).

Where historical Marxist criticism focused on social class, another form of world-context-centred approach, feminist criticism, has focused on issues related to gender. Feminist criticism, from the work of Wollstonecraft (1792) in the late eighteenth century, has aimed to lay bare the mechanisms by which a patriarchal society is established and maintained. Feminists were interested in women as a group, and how their knowledge and viewpoints were often silenced in

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texts as well as in society. Among the issues that different types of feminisms have taken up are the reconstruction of women's history and a female literary tradition, the reconstitution of the traditional canon, critiques of representations of women in texts, and the nature of women's writing and the conditions under which it is produced.

Contemporary

Marxist and feminist criticism have continued to evolve and to be influenced by other forms of world-context-centred approaches, such as post-colonial and queer theories.

Contemporary versions of Marxist criticism, some of them called post-Marxist, continue to concern themselves with matters of politics in more sophisticated ways, drawing upon a range of closely allied disciplines such as history, anthropology and philosophy, and theories about culture, ethnicity and gender. Two contemporary theories with links to Marxist criticism are cultural materialism and new historicism.

Contemporary feminism recognises that there are differences within groups of women, rather than assuming a commonality of interest across and within all groups of women. Like contemporary Marxists, feminists now use a range of intersecting theories and practices to develop new understandings. For example, some feminists have drawn on materialist emphases, while others have taken a post-colonialist approach to gender concerns. Examples of contemporary feminist writers include Kristeva (1986), Sedgwick (1985), Butler (1989), Spivak (1987) and hooks (1981, written according to the author's preference, with a lower-case *h*).

Post-colonial theorists challenge the *civilising* mission of imperial powers and develop alternative accounts of the effects of the colonisers upon the culture, society and sense of self of the colonised. The colonial centre (of power, knowledge, culture and society) is challenged and alternative centres are identified in marginalised indigenous cultures. Issues such as language, representation and culture are explored in post-colonial writing, e.g. Said (1978), Bhabha (1994), West (1996), Spivak, Soyinka (1989), Mudrooroo (1995).

A common assumption in world-context-centred approaches is that societies are profoundly inequitable as a result of structural inequalities and in any society particular social groups and their values may prevail at a particular time. The influence of particular social groups is partly maintained through people being encouraged to consent to the beliefs and values of the powerful and accept the way the world is as natural and inevitable. Texts play their part in upholding or challenging prevailing world views and compete with one another to persuade readers to accept the versions on offer. Readers may negotiate with or resist the ideologies and discourses in texts, and use them strategically for their own purposes.

Texts are constructed within historical, social, cultural, economic and discursive contexts that govern what can be said and how it can be said. Through the workings of discourses and ideologies the rules and norms of language use are maintained, although they always remain open to challenge. Thus particular genres and their stories may work to legitimise a specific world view but may be read and written otherwise. Such texts may alter existing world views and make available new ones. For example, formulaic romance fiction privileges heterosexism and the myth of romance, but this may be parodied, or radically altered to admit a range of relationships which are presented with realistic complexity.

By saying certain things in certain ways, texts do not speak of other things in other ways. All texts are partial (i.e. they are incomplete and promote a certain viewpoint) and deny other versions through their silences. What is silenced are the things that the text must suppress in order to maintain a coherent and consistent world view. However, given the inherently political nature of texts, readers in different times, places and cultures may produce radically different readings by recognising and responding to silences within texts.

Thus world-context-centred reading approaches focus on several key questions. What are the ways a text constructs or represents the world? Which ideologies underpin this construction and are shared by particular cultural groups? What discourses are drawn into play? What are the silences that make an invited reading possible but which may also be used to produce an oppositional reading? What are the political consequences of taking a particular view of the world as *natural* or *preferred*? And, what awareness is to be gained by asking the question: Whose interests are served by these representations of the world in texts?

World-context-centred and author

The works of authors are conditioned by the age in which they live, including its ideologies, discourses and genres available within the culture and language. In this approach, the focus is less on the 'author' as originator of the text. Rather, writers have grown up within particular contexts (including, for example, ideologies and discourses) which shape their writing. World-context-centred approaches are interested both in canonical authors and in retrieving or bringing into view the works of individual writers and groups of writers that have been neglected or repressed within the mainstream.

World-context-centred and text

No culture is homogeneous; all contain a range of diverse, sometimes competing, ideologies and discourses. Some of these ideological and discursive conflicts are played out in the textual representations of the culture. Texts are situated not only within the context of their production, but also their circulation and reception. History, culture, ideologies and discourses condition the genres, functions and possible meanings of texts.

The language of the text is crucial in constructing the particular representations of reality and the forms of address to readers which aim to persuade them to take up particular reading and subject positions. However, texts do not tell the whole story but contain silences that promote particular versions of the world. Therefore in examining texts, readers within this approach will inquire not only into what is said and what is not said, but also importantly, how it is said through an analysis of textual structures and features.

World-context-centred and reader

As socially constructed beings, readers bring with them particular cultural views and values. As noted in reader-centred approaches, texts offer invited reading positions — angles for viewing which make sense of the world represented in the text. World-context-centred approaches take this notion of positioning further, and argue that readers operate within the ideologies and discourses of their culture and so are *beckoned* by the text to take up particular subject positions, i.e. they are subject to such influences and negotiate positions in relation to them.

Some readers align themselves with ideologies in texts that are congruent with their own. Others do not find their world view represented adequately if at all. These marginalised readers may read against the grain of those texts that advocate world views different from their own. Any reader may learn to focus on the silences in such texts. The reader, however, always reads from within a particular ideological and discursive position. Awareness of such positioning enables readers to produce self-reflexive readings.

Reading practices generated by world-context-centred approaches

The following suggested activities are generated from contemporary world-context-centred approaches that focus on the ways texts both shape and are shaped by the discourses and ideologies specific to their cultural and historical contexts.

Activities suitable for earlier in the course

Cultural situatedness

- Explore the Jacobean ideologies that are naturalised in Shakespeare's Macbeth — e.g. patriarchal concerns with order and gender.

- Identify the diverse discourses (residual, dominant or emergent) used by Jung Chang in *Wild Swans* in constructing her life story.

Partiality

- Watch the film *Star Wars* and trace how a preferred form of political organisation, race relations and fundamental moral values are assumed and advocated.

Representation

- Read a novel by DH Lawrence, focusing on and critiquing the operation of binary oppositions which privilege a particular version of masculinity.

Activities suitable for later in the course

- Compare two works that tell two versions of a story (e.g. Bronte's *Jane Eyre* and Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*), identifying the cultural and historical contexts of their production, to critique the partiality of each.

- Discuss different readings of texts based on the case of Martin Guerre (e.g. the French film *The Return of Martin Guerre*, the American film *Sommersby*, Natalie Zemon Davies' account *The Return of Martin Guerre*, Janet Lewis's novel *The Wife of Martin Guerre*, Stephen Greenblatt's article 'Psychoanalysis and Renaissance culture' (Parker & Quint 1986), and the original account of the case by sixteenth-century jurist, Jean de Coras).

- Examine the diverse attitudes to and representations of the body in relation to the machine, in older science fiction and/or newer cyberpunk fictions (e.g. the films *Metropolis*, *Blade Runner*, *The Time Machine*, *The Matrix*).

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