Finding 'the Reader' in Literary Criticism and the Reception of Contemporary Literature

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In literary studies, we often make assumptions about how texts and cultural objects are received by readers and general audiences. But our evidence for these claims is typically anecdotal or based on extrapolations from a singular case-study: our own scholarly close readings. But can we assume that general readers interpret and make meaning from texts in the same way scholars do?

To address the current state of the "reader" in literary studies, I collected all 1,410 articles published across a decade, 2004-2014, from three leading journals of literary theory and criticism: American Literary History (ALH), New Literary History (NLH), and The Proceedings of the Modern Language Association (PMLA). I then narrowed the collection down to articles primarily about literature (rather than drama, film, or theory, for instance), such that 591 articles remained. This set was analyzed to discover how frequently the verb "read" was used, and what authors meant by each use of "read" (i.e. the literal act of reading or as a synonym for "interpretation"). I also asked how often authors referred to a "reader," and determined in each instance if they were referring to an expert, academic reader or the general audience of a literary work. In short, with the seemingly omnipresent use of "reading" and "readers" in contemporary literary criticism, this study asks what kind of reading is actually being described, and who exactly are the communities of readers that literary critics invoke in published scholarship?

In this talk, I share the results of this analysis. To suggest a new approach for making empirical claims about reader reception, I then introduce new methods for literary scholars interested in making claims about how readers and audiences respond to literary texts.

With methodology drawn from qualitative coding analysis, which is often employed in the social sciences, I hope to better understand how literary texts facilitate meaning for readers. I designed Reader Study (www.readerstudy.com), an open-source and web-based research platform to track how recruited study participants read and respond to literary texts. The site guides study design and gathers reader data in the form of pre-surveys, post-surveys, and the highlights and annotations that readers create on texts.

In a pilot study using Reader Study, I recruited 24 first-time readers (ages 18-35) of the post-9/11 novel Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close. From their readings, I was able to gather, qualitatively code (using the software Dedoose), and analyze over 5,000 annotations that participants created pertaining to the ways that the novel invokes 9/11 alongside the WWII bombings of Hiroshima and Dresden. By gathering demographic data like gender, age, and college major (along with post-reading survey and essay questions), I was able to isolate actual—rather than theoretical or imagined—interpretive communities and to see how their reactions to specific parts of the text contributed to their overall reception of the novel, particularly how they empathized with characters and engaged with the historical events mentioned in the plot. This talk shares the results of this case study, along with the specific methodology and variety of insights that can be yielded from this new, reader-informed approach to literary criticism. My talk concludes with an open invitation for scholars in literary studies and beyond to upload their own texts to Reader Study to gather similar reception data for their research.