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Sophia Pathways

Comp II

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Who's Hooked on Stanley Fish?: An Interpretation of Reader-Response Theory

In 1980, literary scholar Stanley Fish published his famous book *Is There a Text in this Class?*

Most widely-read from this text is the self-titled thirteenth chapter, which is seen as one of the primary texts that sparked what is known as 'reader-response theory.' This theory, some might know, is the belief that all readers can and do make their own meanings of texts, whether those be novels, stories, poems, plays, films, or even text-messages shared between friends. Such reader-made meanings or 'responses' are often separated and completely different from the intent of the text's author; instead, they are mostly shaped by our communities – schools and classrooms, churches and religious groups, businesses and neighborhoods, families and friends, to list just a few examples– which offer and teach us different strategies to interpret texts and construct meanings. In other words, there are no fixed, objective, pre-determined textual meanings; rather we invent meanings as we encounter texts wearing the lenses of our own histories, personal experiences, sets of knowledge, and worldviews. This rather postmodern philosophy, however, is one that I want to challenge in part, since I believe it can work ironically to reinforce dominant power-structures and the status quo in our society.

To understand the possible critiques of Stanley Fish's theories, however, one must first understand what he argues. In "Is There a Text in This Class?" Fish works to calm the fears of other

Comment [SL1]: Hi Nyeri! I'm looking forward to reading your essay today!

Comment [SL2]: It'd be a good idea to introduce who Stanley Fish is and why this article was written in the first place.

Comment [SL3]: This is a good summary of the theory presented. It would be good to lead off with what the article touched on first, then go into more detail about the theory that is presented.

Comment [SL4]: Great thesis statement!

literary scholars who think we *need* objective meanings in texts, standardized methods of interpreting these meanings, and prescribed ways of teaching students those methods. They believe that these strategies are required to prevent a fragmentation and eventual breakdown of meaning into an infinite, disorienting cloud of unique and isolated subjective interpretations. For example, in the case of *Hamlet*, what would happen if we strayed so far from Shakespeare’s intent for the play and interpreted it as being about space aliens taking the forms of royalty in the Danish court? What if the reader (the Subject) got too far from the text (the Object)? It is this fears that Fish tries to dismiss by proving the whole problem is a matter of false perception. In his view, the Object and the Subject are not a binary but rather intertwined.

Comment [SL5]: Yes! Good summary. I almost like your organization better than my initial comment!

Fish accomplishes this mostly by arguing that *all* meaning is situational and contextual and is, in fact, created by individuals situated in specific times, places, and institutions with highly evolve, implied systems of meaning-making. For instance, people in the United States see a car on the road and assume that it should drive on the right side; in the United Kingdom, however, they assume the opposite. Hence Fish tries to prove that “the opposition between objectivity and subjectivity is a false one because neither exists in the pure form that would give the opposition its point... Rather, we have readers whose consciousnesses are constituted by a set of conventional notions which when put into operation constitute in turn a conventional, and conventionally seen, object” (332). Fish provides other lengthy anecdotes of situations that have arisen within his interpretive communities, and he uses these situations as evidence to contend that all meanings within text hinge upon and are created by context; in other words, meaning does not exist in a vacuum. He notes that “to be in [a situation] is to ‘see’ with the eyes of its interests, its goals, its understood practices, values, and norms, and so to be conferring significance *by* seeing, not after it” (334) and that “to be in a situation is to see [words] as already meaningful” (313). Therefore, the threat of the subjective fragmentation of meaning is not eliminated

Comment [SL6]: Great summation of the paragraph. I like how you make it into a more digestible example.

Comment [SL7]: I like how you further explain it this in more easily digestible terms.

by arguing the merits of subjective, individual readings but by blasting apart the false Subject/Object binary.

Comment [SL8]: Great use of the article to back up your explanation!

Every interpretive community, then, must necessarily makes meaning of its own accord through the situations and systems in which they find themselves. The implications of Fish's work transfer outside purely literary circles, however. One can see his argument – that meaning cannot be defined within a vacuum – as pointing criticism toward the contemporary trend in educational standardized testing which necessitates students to make the “correct” or “objective” inference in question-scenarios that are mainly detached from a predefined context, situation, or culture. It also has ideological implications in calling for the deconstruction of other binaries – perhaps of gender, race, sexual orientation, etc. – and leading all individuals to live more examined lives within our political and social communities.

Of course, I believe in the beauty of open interpretations. After all, how else would we ever break free from meanings that are handed down through generations and find new possible ways of being, believing, and behaving? Nevertheless, this is where I want to raise some critiques of Fish's theories. Ironically enough, I think this subjective freedom can also shoots itself in the foot. First of all, to form one's own individual interpretation can be liberating; it can also be dangerous, solipsistic, and nihilist. This is where Fish points us toward communities of interpretation, noting that meaning-making is always at least a partially-collective act. Communities and cultures are comprised of many, and it is the many that one encounters *other* perspectives, not just one's own. Second, some interpretive communities have more authority, prestige, or power than others, and we must also examine how social institutions in areas of education, medicine, religion, and government might use their interpretations to sustain the status quo. Resistant and oppositional readings of the messages we receive from on high should also be heard. After all, aren't these part of the values embedded in the mission of true

Comment [SL9]: Good! You're explaining your take on it and why!

Comment [SL10]: Shoot*

Comment [SL11]: Good point. I can see why you think this way.

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democracies? Therefore, I believe that we should let Fish off the hook when it comes to giving the people—and readers-- the power, but we must be mindful that he comes from a position of privilege when he so blatantly ignores how certain people will still always try to control what and *how* we read.

Comment [SL12]: I love your concluding sentence. You've explained yourself in a way that is both entertaining and thoughtful.

Reference

Fish, Stanley. 1980. "Is There a Text in the Class?" from *Is There a Text in this Class?* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Reflection Questions:

- 1. What ideas originally came to mind when you first read through the article? Did your initial response to the article change after reading it for a second time?**

At first, I just read for content. I wanted to get a feel for the article and what the author was trying to say. Then, I read it a second time to really think about how I interpret the information, and what my thoughts on that information were. It's easy to read a scholarly article like this and just settle with the idea that what the author is saying is true. It is better to do some critical thinking while doing so, instead of turning on auto-pilot.

- 2. How does paying attention to the way you respond to a source help you formulate your stance on a topic?**

It really helped me understand the way that I think. I also got a chance to ask myself why I think the way I do about the topic I'm reading about. It helps me grow as a writer, and it helps me create a comprehensive list of reasons why I've taken that particular stance on the topic.

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Source Response Essay Rubric and Feedback

Rubric Category	Feedback	Score <i>(acceptable, needs improvement etc.)</i>
Source Summary	<i>You do a really nice job summarizing the article and giving examples to help the reader understand what it's about. You could maybe spend a little less energy on the summary, but it was very thorough work.</i>	13/15
Source Response	<i>There are some great ideas here! You have added your stance to the article and what the author is trying to get through to the learner. You also explain why you think and react to the article the way you do, citing examples from the text. I would have liked to see more in terms of your response, and less in terms of the summary.</i>	12/15
Organization	<i>While I initially thought your organization could use a bit more work in terms of the summary and the response, the way you have framed your argument works within your essay.</i>	5/5
Style	<i>Your word choices are consistently effective. You do a good job of avoiding redundancy and imprecise language.</i>	5/5
Conventions	<i>You adhere well to all of the APA formatting requirements and your use of English conventions is consistent throughout the touchstone. There are minimal word errors. Well done.</i>	4/5
Reflection	<i>You answer all of the questions thoroughly, providing insights, observations, and examples in your responses. You consistently exceed the length guidelines for your responses.</i>	5/5
Overall Score and Feedback: 44/50		
<p>Very nice job! Your summary of this article is very thorough. Although there could have been more to your response to the article, you've done a good job phrasing your response in a way that is easily digestible.</p>		