

# A CRITICAL EXPLORATION OF HANS ROBERT JAUSS'S THEORY OF RECEPTION

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## **Abstract**

*This article deeply underscores Hans Robert Jauss's theory of reception while applying it to African novels to point out its effectiveness in analyzing readers' emotional reactions to novels. It clearly explains the main concept of Jauss's theory such as aesthetic distance and horizon of expectation including empathy while using Heart of Darkness, On Black Sisters' Street, and Purple Hibiscus for illustration. Furthermore, this study reveals to readers the importance and necessity of Jauss's theoretical approach to examine readers' interpretation and emotional reactions to literary works.*

**Keywords:** Reception theory, distance, expectation, empathy

## **Resumé**

*Cet article met en évidence la théorie de la réception de Hans Robert Jauss en l'appliquant aux romans africains afin de souligner son efficacité dans l'analyse des réactions émotionnelles des lecteurs aux romans. Il explique clairement les principaux concepts de la théorie de Jauss, tels que la distance esthétique et l'horizon d'attente, y compris l'empathie, en utilisant Heart of Darkness, On Black Sisters' Street et Purple Hibiscus à titre d'illustration. En outre, cette étude révèle aux lecteurs l'importance et la nécessité de l'approche théorique de Jauss pour examiner l'interprétation et les réactions émotionnelles des lecteurs aux œuvres littéraires.*

**Mots-clés :** Théorie de la réception, distance, attente, empathie

## Introduction

African literary field, broadly, encompasses an unlimited number of theories that scholars employ throughout their critical analysis. Among these literary approaches, it is obvious to talk about post-colonialism, feminism, structuralism, and realism, to mention but a few. Most often, critics strongly resort to feminism or the postcolonial theory, and their assumptions to critically underscore a piece of literature. In other words, much is done with them in African literature. For instance, in west African universities, particularly at Université Joseph Ki Zerbo, graduate students' critical literary works in the English department mostly applied postmodernism, post-colonialism, and American or British feminism as if they were not other significant approaches to explore literary works but also to bring them into existence through a scholarly interpretation.

In view of these theories, for example, structuralism and New Criticism, which did not give more power of interpretation to readers, it is necessary for African scholars and critics to resort to other theories for example Hans Robert Jauss's reception theory, which makes readers active agents, meaning makers. But, why should African critics resort to Jauss's theoretical approach? Is it significant to use reception theory in the African context? While some theories such as Queer theory and Formalism strictly limit their audience's interpretation to a textual meaning, Jauss's Reader-response approach allows readers to associate their social experiences with the interpretation of literary texts while remaining objective, which sounds more creative and exceptional. His theory further acknowledges that a literary meaning cannot only be limited to a given imaginative work but it must also include the critics' and readers' different social knowledge. In this respect, the objective of this article is to provide readers with a deep overview of Jauss's theory but also to demonstrate how to scholarly apply his theory to a literary work. In addition, the methodology for implementing this work is rooted in critical articles and books

which go along with the spirit of the research. This study explains the theoretical assumptions or concepts by using *Heart of Darkness*, *On Black Sisters' Street*, and *Purple Hibiscus* for illustration. This article, first explores the historical background of the reception theory, second, deeply explains Jauss's approach, and finally examines the concept of empathy.

## 1- Historical Background of Reader-Response Theory

Reader-response theory is a literary criticism created in the 1960s, specifically in the United States of America and Germany. It is a critical theory that studies readers' reactions to a literary work. This theory encompasses multiple theoretical branches such as Louise Michelle Rosenblatt's transactional approach, Norman Holland's psychological approach, David Bleich's subjective approach, and Hans Robert Jauss's theory of reception on which this research paper focuses on.

Hans Robert Jauss (1921-1997) was a German scholar and theorist well-known for his theory of reception in literature. He completed his undergraduate and postgraduate degrees at the University of Heidelberg, Germany, in 1957 with a dissertation on Marcel Proust. His most important books are: *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception* (1982) and *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics* (1982). Together, Jauss and Wolfgang Iser, a German literary theorist, founded the Konstanz School in 1966 which influenced the Anglo-American reader-response criticism. So far, both Jauss and Iser's works focus on the "text-reader relationship" (Shy 982). Indeed, they all show that a reader is an active agent in the creation of meanings through interpretation.

Jauss's theory of reception or aesthetics of reception derives from philosophical backgrounds, namely the phenomenological method of Edmund Husserl, a German philosopher, and the hermeneutics of Martin Heidegger, a German philosopher as well. A phenomenological method is an approach of probing in

a philosophy based on assumptions according to which reality is made up of objects and events “phenomena” as they are understood in a human being’s consciousness. Unlike Husserl’s phenomenological method, Hermeneutics stands as a science of interpretation of literary works. As an explanation, the term hermeneutics historically refers to the ancient Greek god Hermes who interprets messages between mortals and gods. It further illustrates itself as a methodological discipline that allows efficient treatment of problems of interpretation of people in response to texts. So, Jauss engages with these philosophical ideas because they give significant insight into the interpretation and understanding of literary works such as novels, poetry, and paintings, to name but a few.

Moreover, Jauss’s reception theory is a critical approach that studies readers’ reactions to literary works. It considers readers as essential agents who bring into existence artistic works through their interpretations. Indeed, readers are active agents in the making of meaning and knowledge. Jauss’s theory involves two main concepts known as the “horizon of expectation” and “aesthetic distance” which will be explained and illustrated in the sections below.

## **2- Hans Robert Jauss’s theory of reception and its main concepts**

The concept of the “horizon of expectation” is at the center of Jauss’s theory. It is a framework of assumptions and sociocultural norms (social knowledge), which determines readers’ interpretations of any artistic work in a given historical period. Indeed, it includes “the sum of total reactions, prejudgments, verbal and other behavior that greet a work upon its appearance” (*Aesthetic Exp.* xii). By way of illustration, many readers on *Amazon* and *Goodreads* find Unigwe’s work as a “microcosmic representation” of the real Nigeria and a “story of victimization of women.” Specifically, Ojo, a Nigerian

*Goodreads* reader, argues that Unigwe’s novel is the “portrayal of lower-class Nigerian society.” In reality, half of Nigerians live in abject poverty and have poor access to safe drinking water and sanitation facilities, which is a significant challenge. Readers while reading Unigwe’s novel use their experience or social knowledge to react to the novel’s realities known as a depiction of real facts in Nigeria.

In addition, Jauss claims that the historical context of texts must be taken into account when readers interpret the texts because they reflect the social realities of a given period. For the German theorist, the historical context of a novel informs readers about the social context in which the novel is produced. In *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception* (1982), he uses his term “horizon of expectation” to explain the framework of assumptions that informs readers and the novelist’s world in the interpretation of a literary work. Jauss shows that a literary work “predisposes its audience to a very specific kind of reception by announcement” (23), which is known as the “initial horizon of expectation of the text” (*Toward* 23). For instance, the announcement may be the title or the content of a given literary work. He shows that the horizon of the writer’s work “awakens memories” in readers and leads them to an “emotional attitude” (*Toward* 23). This emotional attitude is the readers’ feelings in response to the artistic work. To shed light on this emotional attitude, many readers on *Goodreads* and *Amazon* assert that Unigwe’s story of four African women “though fictional but real,” a “horrific story,” a story of “dashed-hope,” a “portrayal of lower-class Nigerian society,” and a heartbreaking story. These quotes represent the readers’ social knowledge contextualizing Chika Unigwe’s *On Black Sisters’ Street*.

Furthermore, he shows that the meaning of a written work is neither fixed nor universal but rather variable because the meaning may shift from a given historical period to another one. Thus, Jauss’s concept of “time or period” can influence the interpretations of readers. Jauss argues that a literary work “is

not an object that stands by itself and that offers the same view to each reader in each period. It is not a monument that monologically reveals its timeless” (*Towards* 21), which shows that the meaning of a literary work is variable. For example, readers’ interpretations of *On Black Sisters’ Street* as a “portrayal of lower-class Nigerian society”, “cultural snapshot”, and “microcosmic representation” of Nigeria may change with the interpretation of a new era’s readers.

For Jauss, the interpretation of a literary work by readers changes with time regarding the socio-political realities in which they live. For instance, when Joseph Conrad’s novel *Heart of Darkness* came out in 1902, European readers perceived it as one of the greatest literary works in English literature. They recognized *Heart of Darkness* as one of the “finest works of prose fiction in the English language” (*Mistaking Africa* 51). Many readers in 1902 had no problem with these words and the racist content because Africans were legally or allegedly inferior to white people. From slavery up to colonization, Africans were widely viewed as uncivilized beings outside of modernity. African religion, education, traditions, and languages were not seen by Europeans as valuable or even credible. For that reason, Europeans regarded colonization as legitimate, helpful, and a “civilizing mission.” Europeans saw colonization as a suitable means to teach European cultures (the white man’s religion, education, traditions, and languages) to Africans while denigrating African culture. Europeans of this era largely saw Africans as inferior. So, Conrad’s work corresponded to the expectations of readers of this era regarding its portrayal of Africans as sub-humans. It was rather considered as an epoch-making masterpiece of this era.

But 70 years later, many readers, including critics, got into a debate concerning Conrad’s novel, *Heart of Darkness*. African readers rejected Conrad’s work on the grounds of its racist content that treated Africans as “darkness,” “cannibals,” and “savages.” To shed light on this dramatic change of attitude to

Conrad's novel seven decades later, it is necessary to understand what exactly occurred on the African continent in the 70s. Specifically, the social and political contexts changed and many African countries got their independence in 1960, which heralded the end of the colonial era. In addition, the negritude movement founded by Aimé Césaire, Leopold Sédar Senghor, and Léon-Gontran Damas in the 1960s and 70s fought for a change in Africans' perceptions of themselves, a positive self-regard.

The role of the negritude movement consisted in valuing African cultures, histories, languages, and reshaping African identity around the world. Thus, racist portrayals were no longer welcome, but also they were recognized as being racist. As a result, they were rejected. The horizon of expectations changed for readers of *Heart of Darkness* due to the change of socio-political realities. So, portraying Africans as savages and cannibals could not match up with nowadays' readers because we are not in 1902 when showing Africans as savages or cannibals was widely accepted. Furthermore, Jauss shows that if readers' expectations match up with the horizons of a given literary work, then there is no rejection of the literary work. For example, Unigwe's descriptions of poor living conditions and poverty in Nigeria are not surprising and unfamiliar to western readers' expectations due to prevalent stereotypes and negative Western media portrayals they have in mind about Africa. The Kenyan writer Binyavanga Wainaina's 2005 satire "How to Write About Africa" strikes back at how Western writers see Africa solely as a continent of poverty, misery, and starvation. This widely popular satire points out how common it is for the West to associate poverty with Africa.

Western readers have a deep understanding of African realities, poverty, and economic pressures thanks to their advanced technology, "television, magazines, movies, novels, and other common sources" (*Mistaking Africa* 15). For example, movies such as *Out of Africa* (1985) which is a romantic story of a

plantation in Kenya, *The Lion King* (1994), a cartoon, which portrays a jungle, and *Blood Diamond* (2006) which deals with a political exploitation of people in Sierra Leone, form the dominate narrative of Africa in the West. These movies foster stereotypes such as famine and war, appalling poverty, and barbarity. Western media largely focus on poverty only in Africa; as a consequence, Westerners largely associate poverty with Africa. Many Westerners ignore positive things about Africa, notably education and beautiful places, to name but a few. These prejudices regarding Africa serve as a horizon of expectation enabling largely European readers to understand African writings such as *On Black Sisters' Street* which depicts hardship and Nigerian women's out-migration.

Westerners' preconceived ideas bring them to comprehend misery and lack of opportunities in present-day African societies. But it is bad to have only a negative preconception concerning Africa because people have a life's style, attractive sites, and a good education too. So, Unigwe's readers' expectations match up with the initial horizons of her novel. Initial horizons of a literary work that match up with readers' expectations are known as a fulfillment of readers' expectations. If readers' expectations do not match up with the initial horizons of a novel, then there is a disappointment of readers' expectations. A case in point is Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's first book *Purple Hibiscus*. In "The Danger of the Single Story" Adichie recounts how an agent or someone who was evaluating her manuscript of *Purple Hibiscus* found that it was unrealistic simply because this American reader did not think rich Africans existed. The reader rejects the validity of her story because it did not match his expectations. Fortunately, Adichie found a receptive American publisher. What the story carries for those who are ignorant about rich Africans is the universality of domestic violence. Adichie adeptly paints a detailed picture of domestic violence to make it palpable and believable to readers. For Jauss, a literary work may fulfill its readers' expectations, or

“it may disappoint the expectations by creating a distance between itself and them” (*Aesthetic Experience* xii), which he labels as “aesthetic distance”: a creation of distance between one’s self and a literary work. This concept of aesthetic distance is interwoven with the concept of the horizon of expectation, and as such one cannot dissociate them from each other.

Jauss’s aesthetic distance refers to the distance between readers’ expectations and a work’s horizons, which may conform to, or subvert in varying degrees, readers’ expectations. He uses “aesthetic distance” to show the “hiatus (distance) in the life of pleasure” (*Aesthetic Exp.* 31). For him, “hiatus” refers to the distance between readers and a written work during the contemplation of the work. In other words, he uses “aesthetic distance” to show the distance between the reality of readers’ consciousness and the imaginative reality portrayed in a literary work. The theorist shows that aesthetic distance cannot be a “one way, merely contemplative, or wholly disinterested relation to a ‘distanced’ object” (*Aesthetic Experience.* 31). Readers’ disinterested relation to a literary work represents the increase of distance, the non-fulfillment or disappointment of expectations which brings about a change of horizon. This change of horizon results in the non-fulfillment or disappointment of readers’ expectations. As mentioned, the “time period” can influence readers’ interpretations, which can also cause an increase in aesthetic distance between readers and a novel. For example, one can note the increase of aesthetic distance between the 1960s African readers and Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* 1902 because there was a socio-political change. As a result, the horizons of Conrad’s 1902 novel disappointed the 1960s African readers’ horizon of expectations.

Jauss argues that “to the degree that this distance decreases, and no turn toward the horizon of yet-unknown experience is demanded of the receiving consciousness, the closer the work comes to the sphere of ‘culinary’ (the rapprochement between a reader and a literary work) (*Toward Aesthetic* 25); hence, there

is a close aesthetic distance, the fulfillment of expectations. The close aesthetic distance occurs when the hiatus decreases between a reader and a literary work. Hiatus stands for the gap between a reader and a given literary work. In this work, I am interested in the contemplative relation to a literary work, which concerns the close aesthetic distance. He characterized this latter as “precisely fulfilling the expectations prescribed by a ruling standard of taste, in that it satisfies the desire for the reproduction of the familiar beautiful; confirms familiar sentiments; sanctions wishful notions; makes unusual experiences enjoyable as ‘sensations’; or even raises moral issues” (*Toward Aesthetic* 25). He simply reveals to us how a writer by fulfilling readers’ expectations entangles them in a literary work. Jauss states that this artistic enjoyment or aesthetic pleasure in a given context connects “self-enjoyment” and the enjoyment of what is other”, hence “aesthetic pleasure of identification”.

The aesthetic pleasure of identification simply refers to readers’ experience of characters’ situations and sharing of feeling with characters through imagination. A close aesthetic distance between a reader and a literary work leads to readers’ identification with the characters. For example, many readers comment on *Goodreads* and *Amazon* that Unigwe’s story of the four African female protagonists is a “heartbreaking,” “horrific,” “tragic story,” and a “heart-wrenching” story that brings “tears into eyes.” Readers’ reactions to Unigwe’s novel highlight their identification with characters in their imagination. The aesthetic pleasure of identification (close aesthetic distance) gives the possibility of experiencing what is other (*Aesthetic Experience*. 33). In fact, a byproduct of a close aesthetic distance and fulfillment of readers’ horizon of expectations is empathy.

### **3- Empathy as a Result of Close Aesthetic Hiatus and Expectations Fulfillment**

As mentioned in the above section, the fulfillment of readers' expectations and a close aesthetic distance leads to empathy. Empathy, widely, refers to one's ability to understand and share the feelings of another person or people. Furthermore, a well-known American narrative empathy scholar, Suzanne Keen, gives a clear insight into the definition of empathy. She argues that empathy is "the sharing of feeling and perspective-taking by reading, viewing, hearing, or imagining narratives of another's situation and condition" ("Narrative" 1). For Keen, empathy is our ability to share other individuals' emotions and situations, and to understand them, not only through imagination or observation but also through hearing. Narrative scholars distinguish two types of narrative empathy: "diegetic empathy and readerly empathy. As an explanation, readerly empathy concerns the relation or interplay between readers and characters and the narrator in a text, while diegetic empathy is the relation between the narrator and imaginative human beings.

In addition, Keen defines empathy as "the sharing of feeling and perspective-taking by reading, viewing, hearing, or imagining narratives of another's situation and condition" ("Narrative" 1). In other words, empathy is the action of being sensitive, understanding, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, pains, and sufferings of other human beings through imagination, observation, and hearing. As an illustration, many scholars argue that reading novels makes us empathic toward other individuals in a society. But, is it really important to be empathic toward another person? The importance of empathy remains a subject of debate among many scholars.

Anti-empathy scholars find the discourse of narrative empathy as a threat to one's happiness. They claim that empathizing with another person can be bad for one's life. Ann Jurecic, an associate professor in the department of English at Rutgers

University and associate editor for the journal *Literature and Medicine*, reveals to us that “works in affect theory...warn us to be[careful] of the fellow feeling associated with social emotions, such as empathy, sympathy, compassion, and pity...[that] can be expressions of power, appropriations of others’ experience[s], and falsely oversimplified understandings of social and cultural relationships” (11). In fact, one may use empathic words as a means to dominate or take control of another person, which violates the real meaning of empathy. Using emotional words as a means of domination is not empathy, but rather a manipulation, and that can be violent. In addition, C. Dary Cameron, assistant professor of psychology and research associate at the Rock Ethics Institute, Pennsylvania State University, *et al*, in their online post show that empathy leads to “moral myopia” (“Does”) i.e., being empathic can lead to one’s exploitation by another human being, which does not incarnate the sense of empathy—of sharing another person’s situations and emotions. In reaction to anti-empathy scholars, I argue that what is known as the seamy side of empathy is individuals’ own choices and goals.

In reality, empathy is the backbone of a good society, a better social helping. Some scholars argue that reading can lead us to help people. Narrative empathy scholars show that empathy is necessary for societies. As evidence, Keen shows that “empathic emotion motivates altruistic action, resulting in less aggression, (...) less blaming of victims for their misfortunes, increased cooperation in conflict situations, and improved actions on behalf of needy individuals and members of stigmatized groups” (*Empathy* vii). These actions are vital to society. For Keen, being empathic is good because it leads us to understand and aid others. In addition, Maia Szalavitz, an American neuroscientist, and Bruce Perry, professor of behavioral sciences at the Feinberg School of Medicine in Chicago, point out that “empathy underlies virtually everything that makes society work- like trust, altruism, collaboration, love, charity. Failure to

empathize is a key part of most social problems-crimes, violence, war, racism, child abuse, and inequity, to name just a few” (4). For them, empathy leads to altruistic actions, love, and kindness. They teach us how important being empathic is. In reaction to these scholars’ ideas, I mention that “the sharing of feeling and perspective-taking by reading, viewing, hearing, or imagining narratives of another’s situation and condition” (“Narrative” 1) play a great role in human beings’ lives thanks to its social function such as love, charity, altruism, and non-violence. Therefore, the application of Jauss’s reception theory can help to exemplify the value of literature in our society; the value in helping to make better people, to make people who care and morally behave towards other people.

Nowadays, digitalization has affected narrative empathy, yet scientific studies argue that a slow and deep reading is beneficial for us. There is scientific evidence found in the human body and its reactions regarding empathy. Neuroscientists shed light on the understanding of people’s mind reading and “emotional sharing abilities.” Rick Hanson, an American neuropsychologist, argues that “when [we] see-or just imagine other people’s sufferings, feelings, and doing, [our] brain automatically generates a virtual experience within [ourselves] of something close to what the other person is experiencing” (“Empathy” 5). For Hanson, a person can vicariously experience another person’s situations or sufferings while observing or imagining the latter’s situations. In nutshell, our imagination and observation of fictional characters make us empathic. The case in point is that, Unigwe’s *On Black Sisters’ Street* through sensory descriptions and emotional flashbacks in making readers imagine and observe the characters’ poor living conditions and lack of opportunities as if they were real, which empathically engages them. For example, readers, through the online reading site Goodreads, empathically witness that characters’ story is “heart-wrenching” and “painful”, which

illustrate the transformative power of novels, particularly, African ones.

## Conclusion

This study gives significant insight into Hans Robert Jauss's theory of reception. First, it deeply explains and illustrates the concept of the "horizon of expectation" known as a social knowledge that determines readers' interpretations of any imaginative work in a given historical moment. It points out that a literary work may fulfill its audience's expectations, or "it may disappoint them while creating a distance between readers and itself which is considered as aesthetic hiatus. Second, the article shows that the fulfillment of expectations and a close aesthetic distance leads to empathy. It further reveals that empathy is the action of understanding and vicariously experiencing the feelings of other human beings through imagination and observation. So far, this work significantly emphasizes how Jauss's theory can be employed to examine the reception of a literary work of a given period.

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