

READERLY INNOCENCE, MORAL SHOCK, AND INSTITUTIONAL AUTHORITY: A READER-RESPONSE ANALYSIS OF PENELOPE ROWE'S *THE INNOCENTS*

Yulhenli Thabran

English Education Study Program, Universitas Jambi, Indonesia

E-mail: yulhenli@unja.ac.id

Received: 2026-01-31

Accepted: 2026-02-21

Published: 2026-06-05

Abstract

This study is among the first to examine moral shock and narrative indeterminacy in Penelope Rowe's *The Innocents* through reader-response criticism. While scholarship on ethically disturbing fiction often emphasizes thematic or ideological critique, less attention has been paid to how readerly affect evolves during the act of reading. Addressing this gap, the article employs a qualitative reader-response-oriented close textual analysis to investigate how sympathy, moral destabilization, and narrative indeterminacy structure interpretation. Rather than presenting empirical reader data, the analysis focuses on implied reader positions embedded in the text. The findings identify three interrelated mechanisms. First, innocence is constructed affectively through narrative alignment with the child protagonist. Second, moral shock destabilizes trust in institutional authority by exposing interpretive rigidity. Third, the open ending withholds psychological closure and transfers ethical responsibility to the reader. These responses are not incidental reactions but structured aesthetic strategies that generate the story's ethical force. By demonstrating how affect, indeterminacy, and reader positioning operate together, this article advances reader-response criticism and literary ethics, showing how discomfort and uncertainty function as mechanisms of ethical meaning-making in morally unsettling short fiction.

Keywords: *ethical reading; innocence; institutional authority; moral shock; narrative indeterminacy; reader-response criticism*

1. Introduction

Literary texts that unsettle readers ethically and emotionally often resist stable interpretation, requiring approaches that account for the reader's active role in meaning construction. Short fiction that depicts childhood, institutional authority, and moral judgment is particularly prone to such instability, as it invites readers to negotiate discomfort, sympathy, and moral uncertainty during reading. Penelope Rowe's short story *The Innocents* presents one such case. First published in an anthology of Australian short fiction, the story portrays a child placed under religious authority and subjected to rigid moral interpretation, resulting in a deeply disturbing reading experience (Rowe, 2000). Rather than offering narrative resolution or explicit authorial judgment, the text foregrounds ambiguity, silence, and an abrupt ending that compels reflection beyond the final page.

To date, *The Innocents* has received limited sustained scholarly attention. Existing discussions tend to emphasize institutional authority and childhood vulnerability or approach the story through ideological critique. However, little research has examined how the narrative structures readerly affect as a mechanism of meaning production. In particular, the evolving interplay of sympathy, moral shock, and ethical uncertainty during the reading process remains underexplored. This study addresses that gap by foregrounding reader response as the primary site of interpretation and by analyzing how the story positions readers through affective alignment, moral destabilization, and narrative indeterminacy.

Traditional text-centered approaches that prioritize thematic closure or authorial intention are limited in addressing texts like *The Innocents*, where meaning emerges not only from represented events but from readers' responses to what is withheld—psychological aftermath, moral clarification, and narrative justice. Interpretation therefore becomes inseparable from readerly experience, making reader-response criticism a particularly appropriate framework.

Reader-response theory conceptualizes literary meaning as an event produced through interaction between text and reader. Rosenblatt (1995) describes this process as transactional, while Fish (1980) emphasizes interpretive activity shaped by communal frameworks. Together, these perspectives shift critical attention from thematic extraction to the experiential and ethical dynamics of reading.

This study investigates how *The Innocents* (1) constructs readerly sympathy through affective alignment with the child protagonist, (2) generates moral shock that destabilizes trust in institutional authority, and (3) employs narrative indeterminacy to transfer ethical responsibility to the reader. Rather than treating interpretation as the extraction of thematic conclusions, the analysis examines how meaning emerges through evolving reader responses across the narrative.

By foregrounding reader positioning as a structured outcome of narrative design, this study contributes to reader-response criticism and literary ethics, demonstrating that discomfort and uncertainty function as mechanisms of ethical engagement rather than incidental reactions. In doing so, it affirms that literary meaning is not a static property of the text but an event enacted through reader participation, interpretive revision, and ethical reflection.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Reader-Response Criticism and the Centrality of the Reader

Reader-response criticism emerged as a reaction against text-centered approaches that locate literary meaning exclusively within the formal properties of the text. Rather than conceiving meaning as a fixed entity awaiting discovery, reader-response theorists emphasize reading as an active interpretive process in which meaning is produced through the interaction between text and reader (Suleiman & Crosman, 1980).

Stanley Fish argues that meaning is not embedded in textual structures but generated through interpretive acts shaped by shared reading strategies within interpretive communities (Fish, 1980). From this perspective, reading is an event, and interpretation unfolds temporally as readers revise judgments in response to shifting expectations. Fish's theory of affective stylistics highlights how emotional and ethical responses—such as shock, sympathy, or discomfort—are integral to meaning-making rather than subjective byproducts.

Similarly, Louise Rosenblatt's transactional theory conceptualizes literary meaning as emerging from a reciprocal relationship between reader and text (Rosenblatt, 1995). Her distinction between efferent and aesthetic reading clarifies how literary works invite readers to attend not merely to information but to lived-through experience, including emotional disturbance and ethical reflection.

While Fish foregrounds the communal dimensions of interpretation and Rosenblatt emphasizes the transactional encounter between reader and text, both reject the notion of textual autonomy and instead situate meaning within structured reader participation. Together, their perspectives establish a foundation for analyzing how narratives guide emotional alignment and ethical judgment as part of the reading process itself.

Within this reader-centered framework, affective engagement has been further theorized through the concept of narrative empathy, understood as the reader's emotional and ethical alignment with characters (Keen, 2006). Recent work by Fernandez-Quintanilla (2025) and Fernandez-Quintanilla and Stradling (2023) demonstrates that such empathy can be traced to identifiable linguistic and stylistic features, including focalization and narrative restraint. These studies reinforce reader-response claims by showing that affective engagement is not impressionistic but structured through textual design.

2.2 Reception Aesthetics and the Dynamics of Expectation

While Fish and Rosenblatt focus on interpretive activity during reading, Hans Robert Jauss situates reader response within broader historical and cultural frameworks. His concept of the "horizon of expectations" describes the set of norms and assumptions readers bring to a text (Jauss, 1982). When a narrative disrupts these expectations, it produces what Jauss terms "aesthetic distance," prompting readers to reassess prior assumptions.

This process is especially significant in narratives that depict sensitive issues such as innocence, authority, and moral judgment. Readers may initially respond with certainty, only to revise their interpretations as narrative implications unfold. Jauss's model thus explains how interpretive stability can give way to ethical reconsideration.

Whereas Fish emphasizes interpretive communities and Rosenblatt highlights transactional engagement, Jauss extends reader-response theory by accounting for the historical variability of reception and the destabilization of moral expectations. Together with Iser's theory of textual gaps and "blanks" (Iser, 1974, 1978), these perspectives clarify how indeterminacy functions not as ambiguity for its own sake but as a mechanism that compels reader participation.

Fernandez-Quintanilla's (2025) model complements reception aesthetics by tracing how shifts in reader response can be identified through linguistic and narrative evidence. This convergence between theoretical and empirical approaches strengthens the claim that readerly affect and moral shock can be analyzed as structured outcomes of narrative design rather than as subjective reactions.

2.3 Theoretical Convergence and Analytical Implications

Although these theorists differ in emphasis—Fish privileging interpretive communities, Rosenblatt foregrounding transactional experience, Iser focusing on textual gaps, and Jauss highlighting historical horizons—they converge in rejecting fixed textual meaning and affirming the centrality of structured reader participation. Taken together, their

frameworks provide a comprehensive model for examining how sympathy, moral shock, and narrative indeterminacy operate as mechanisms of reader positioning.

2.4 Positioning the Present Study

Although reader-response criticism has been extensively theorized, its application to short fiction that foregrounds childhood, institutional authority, and moral ambiguity remains limited. Existing studies often prioritize thematic or ideological analysis while paying insufficient attention to how readers' responses evolve across readings. Consequently, the affective dimension of interpretation—particularly sympathy, moral shock, and unresolved ethical concern—has not been adequately explored.

Drawing on Rosenblatt (1995), Fish (1980), Iser (1974, 1978), Jauss (1982), and contemporary research on narrative empathy, the present study positions reader response as the primary site of meaning-making. By integrating transactional theory, affective stylistics, reception aesthetics, and gap theory, this study analyzes how readerly sympathy, moral shock, and indeterminacy function together as structured mechanisms of ethical engagement.

In doing so, the study contributes to reader-response criticism by showing how indeterminacy, reception, and audience positioning transform readers from passive observers into ethically implicated participants in the act of reading.

3. Research Method

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative close textual analysis informed by reader-response criticism to examine how meaning emerges through readers' emotional and ethical engagement with *The Innocents*. Rather than seeking a fixed thematic conclusion, the analysis focused on how the narrative structures readerly responses, including sympathy, moral shock, and sustained ethical uncertainty.

Reader-response criticism conceptualizes reading as an interpretive event in which meaning is produced through interaction between text and reader rather than extracted from textual content alone (Fish, 1980; Rosenblatt, 1995). This study does not examine empirical reader responses but analyzes implied reader positions structured by the text, drawing on Iser's concept of the implied reader and Fish's theory of interpretive activity. Reader response is therefore treated as a theoretically grounded construct inferred from textual strategies rather than from collected reader data. This orientation enables examination of how narrative techniques invite and regulate affective and ethical engagement as structured mechanisms of meaning-making.

3.2 Data Source

The primary data consisted of Penelope Rowe's short story *The Innocents*, first published in *The Penguin Century of Australian Stories* (Rowe, 2000). The story was selected because of its ethically disturbing subject matter, restrained narrative voice, and deliberate lack of closure—features that invite strong reader involvement and interpretive instability.

The unit of analysis comprised selected narrative moments, descriptive details, silences, and structural features that position readers affectively and ethically. Particular attention was given to depictions of institutional authority, representations of childhood innocence, and the story's abrupt ending, as these function as key sites of reader positioning.

3.3 Analytical Framework

The analysis draws on key concepts from reader-response and reception theory. Rosenblatt's (1995) transactional theory provides the foundation for understanding meaning as emerging through interaction between textual cues and reader engagement. Fish's (1980) notion of interpretive activity informs the examination of how readers' judgments evolve as expectations are confirmed or disrupted.

Iser's (1974, 1978) theory of aesthetic response guides the analysis of textual gaps and indeterminacy, particularly his concept of "blanks" that activate reader participation. Jauss' (1982) concept of the horizon of expectations contextualizes how readers' initial assumptions may be destabilized through aesthetic distance. Together, these frameworks enable reader positioning to be analyzed as a structured outcome of narrative design rather than as a purely subjective reaction.

3.4 Data Analysis Procedures

The analysis followed an iterative interpretive process. First, the text was segmented into narrative units likely to structure reader response, including scenes of institutional judgment, representations of bodily innocence, and moments of narrative withholding. These units were categorized according to the type of response they invite, such as sympathy, moral shock, or ethical uncertainty.

Second, the analysis examined how reader expectations are constructed and disrupted across the narrative, identifying points at which interpretive stability collapses and requires reassessment. Third, the absence of narrative closure was analyzed as a deliberate reader-positioning strategy that transfers ethical responsibility beyond the text. Finally, these analytical stages were synthesized into thematic findings demonstrating how meaning emerges through evolving reader engagement rather than through explicit narrative resolution.

3.5 Trustworthiness and Rigor

Analytical rigor was maintained through systematic alignment between textual evidence and established reader-response concepts. Interpretive claims were grounded in identifiable narrative features and consistently cross-checked against the theoretical frameworks guiding the study. Reliability was strengthened through repeated close readings and the consistent application of stable analytical categories—sympathy, moral shock, and indeterminacy—across all stages of interpretation.

By clearly defining reader response as a theoretical construct and maintaining coherence between textual evidence and conceptual analysis, the study ensures methodological transparency and consistency.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Readerly Sympathy and the Construction of Innocence

One of the most immediate reader responses elicited by *The Innocents* is sympathy toward Isobel. From the opening pages, the narrative constructs her world as orderly, gentle, and emotionally secure, encouraging readers to perceive her as innocent. The narration emphasizes her smallness, routine, and attachment to simple comforts, particularly her stuffed bunny. Isobel's room is described as containing "a small desk and chair," "a bed with a pink bedspread," and "a little furry bunny that her mother had given her on her third birthday" (p. 669). These details function not merely as background description but as

affective cues that position readers within a protective interpretive stance before any moral conflict is introduced.

From a reader-response perspective, such narrative details construct an implied reader predisposed to protective sympathy. By foregrounding domestic intimacy and emotional safety, the text structures reader alignment prior to the emergence of moral tension. Sympathy here operates as a guided interpretive effect rather than a spontaneous emotional reaction, illustrating how narrative design regulates readerly affect.

Readerly sympathy is reinforced through the depiction of Isobel's daily life in the convent as calm and structured. The narrative notes that "this was Isobel's little world and she was very happy in it" (p. 671). The simplicity of this statement invites readers to accept her contentment as genuine. At this stage, the reader's horizon of expectations (Jauss, 1982) aligns with the assumption that the convent is a site of care and safety, establishing interpretive stability that will later be destabilized. Jauss's framework clarifies how this initial stability forms the baseline against which subsequent moral disruption acquires its force.

The portrayal of Isobel's bodily experience further complicates reader response. Her private self-soothing behavior is described in sensory, non-sexualized language: she "lies quite still, enjoying the snug safe feeling it gives her," before "a little wave of heat falls over her and she falls onto her back, crying out with pleasure" (p. 672). The narration refuses to frame this experience as sexual or transgressive, presenting it instead as an unnamed bodily sensation beyond Isobel's understanding.

This narrative restraint is crucial. Readers experience discomfort without being provided with an explicit interpretive label, a strategy that activates what Iser (1978) describes as textual gaps. By withholding adult terminology or moral commentary, the narrative creates a gap between the reader's interpretive awareness and the child's limited understanding, compelling readers to negotiate meaning rather than receive it. These gaps intensify the reader's participatory role in constructing innocence as experiential rather than doctrinal.

In Rosenblatt's (1995) transactional terms, innocence emerges through the reader's lived-through engagement with narrative cues rather than through institutional definition. Ethical alignment with Isobel therefore arises from structured indeterminacy rather than explicit moral instruction. The text does not assert innocence; it positions readers to experience it.

4.2 Moral Shock and the Collapse of Trust in Authority

While the early sections of the story cultivate readerly trust in the convent and its religious authority, this trust is gradually destabilized through escalating acts of interpretive rigidity. The narrative does not merely depict institutional authority; it orchestrates a progressive disruption of reader alignment, producing moral shock as a structured interpretive effect.

The turning point occurs when Reverend Mother witnesses Isobel's private behavior. Her response—"Give me that at once," snapped Reverend Mother... and she snatched Isobel's beloved Bunny from her and left the room" (p. 673)—is marked by immediate moral judgment rather than inquiry or compassion. The abrupt command and violent removal of the object associated with Isobel's comfort produce a sharp emotional jolt, collapsing the reader's previously stabilized trust in authority.

This scene marks a reversal of the affective alignment established earlier: the institution once perceived as protective becomes the agent of coercion. The confiscation of

the Bunny exposes the fragility of earlier interpretive assumptions, compelling readers to reassess institutional authority not as benevolent but as doctrinally rigid. Moral shock here functions as a narrative mechanism that forces interpretive revision rather than passive response.

Phelan's (2011) rhetorical theory of narrative ethics clarifies this shift by emphasizing that ethical judgment arises not only from represented actions but from the ways narratives guide readers' evaluative positioning. In *The Innocents*, the Reverend Mother's intervention operates as an ethically charged communicative act that invites readers to judge both the action and the moral framework authorizing it. The narrative thus structures moral shock by exposing the disjunction between institutional certainty and experiential innocence.

The appeal to *VITALOGY: An Encyclopaedia of Health* further intensifies this collapse of trust. By replacing engagement with Isobel's lived experience with doctrinal citation, the narrative foregrounds the substitution of abstract authority for ethical attentiveness. This shift from experiential observation to textual authority reinforces the rigidity of the convent's interpretive framework and heightens reader estrangement. Readers confront the realization that harm emerges not from ignorance but from certainty.

Moral shock reaches its peak when Isobel is restrained at night: Mother Infirmarian "bound tightly with long strips of cotton cloth" her hands (p. 676). Presented without sensationalism, this act compels readers to reassess earlier judgments of the nuns as merely naive. In Jaus's (1982) terms, this moment produces aesthetic distance by rupturing the horizon of expectations initially associated with moral guardianship. What once appeared protective now appears punitive, intensifying ethical estrangement.

The narrative thus reveals how harm can arise from benevolent intent when interpretation becomes rigid and self-confirming. Fish's (1980) notion of interpretive communities clarifies this process: the nuns operate within a closed interpretive system that excludes alternative understandings of childhood and bodily experience. Readers, positioned outside this interpretive community, experience moral shock through recognition of its internal coherence and ethical consequences. The story therefore structures resistance not through overt condemnation but through the reader's progressive recognition of institutional certainty as a source of harm.

4.3 Open Ending, Psychological Scar, and Reader Responsibility

While the previous subsection demonstrated how institutional authority enforces innocence through disciplinary mechanisms, the narrative's most decisive intervention occurs at its conclusion. The story does not merely depict psychological damage; it withholds resolution. By refusing narrative closure, the text shifts attention from the event of punishment to its unresolved consequences, transforming the reader from observer into interpreter of aftermath. It is in this open ending that the story's reader-response dynamics become most explicit.

The narrative concludes abruptly. After Isobel's punishment, the final sentence declares: "So, nearly five-year-old Isobel and Reverend Mother lost their innocence at the same time" (p. 677). The story ends at the moment of moral collapse without recovery, reconciliation, or projection into the future. This denial of narrative completion intensifies ethical uncertainty rather than resolving it.

Narrative indeterminacy compels readers to imagine Isobel's psychological future beyond the textual boundary. The narrator records that "dark lines appeared under her eyes, she developed an astigmatism, and she began to stutter so badly that some of the nuns

thought she might be brain-damaged" (p. 677). These understated somatic and speech-related symptoms signal trauma while avoiding explicit psychological exposition. By withholding diagnostic language, the narrative resists interpretive containment and instead invites readers to infer the depth and duration of harm.

Such minimalism aligns with contemporary scholarship on literary trauma. Khan and Wakeel (2025) observe that narratives representing psychological harm often rely on bodily or behavioral indicators—altered appearance, speech disruption, or silence—to imply enduring damage. In *The Innocents*, Isobel's physical deterioration and stutter function in precisely this way. Trauma is not explained; it is suggested, requiring readers to complete the psychological trajectory that the text leaves open.

From a reader-response perspective, the open ending constitutes a significant textual gap in Iser's (1978) formulation. By withholding causal explanation and future resolution, the narrative activates imaginative participation and ethical projection. The gap operates both structurally and morally: readers must assess the long-term consequences of institutional violence without narrative reassurance. Meaning is therefore not delivered but enacted through engagement.

Suleiman and Crosman's (1980) notion of audience implication clarifies this transfer of responsibility. The denial of closure displaces interpretive labor onto the reader, who must confront the moral implications of authority's actions. Rosenblatt's (1995) concept of the aesthetic stance further explains why emotional engagement persists beyond the final line: reading becomes reflective evaluation rather than narrative consumption.

The equivalence drawn between Isobel and the Reverend Mother intensifies this effect. The claim that both "lost their innocence" destabilizes conventional moral binaries. Innocence is no longer aligned with age or authority but becomes a fragile ethical condition that can be forfeited through both suffering and coercion. This ironic symmetry unsettles the reader's moral hierarchy and complicates simplistic judgments of victim and perpetrator.

In Jaus's (1982) terms, the ending disrupts the horizon of expectation that typically anticipates justice or restoration. Instead of closure, the narrative leaves a psychological scar. By suspending resolution, the text converts aesthetic distance into ethical responsibility: interpretation remains unfinished, and moral evaluation becomes the reader's task.

Taken together, the open ending functions as a deliberate reader-response strategy that extends the story's ethical force beyond its final sentence. Indeterminacy is not a narrative deficiency but a structural device that ensures sustained reader involvement, reinforcing the central claim that meaning in *The Innocents* emerges through the active negotiation of moral ambiguity.

4.4 Summary of Findings

Across the three thematic strands identified in this study, *The Innocents* generates meaning through structured reader engagement rather than through plot resolution alone. The progression from affective alignment to moral destabilization and finally to narrative indeterminacy reveals a deliberate escalation in reader positioning. The affective construction of sympathy establishes innocence as an experiential category; moral shock destabilizes institutional authority; and the open ending relocates ethical judgment to the reader.

Taken together, these stages demonstrate how narrative form systematically guides emotional alignment, disrupts interpretive stability, and ultimately transfers ethical

responsibility beyond the text. Meaning therefore arises through the reader's emotional, moral, and interpretive participation rather than through explicit authorial instruction.

In synthesizing transactional theory (Rosenblatt), affective stylistics (Fish), textual gap theory (Iser), and reception aesthetics (Jauss), the analysis confirms that indeterminacy and moral shock function as structured mechanisms of ethical engagement. The story thus exemplifies central premises of reader-response and audience-oriented criticism while also resonating with contemporary research on narrative empathy, which emphasizes the role of indeterminacy in sustaining ethical involvement beyond the text (Fernandez-Quintanilla, 2020).

4.5 Limitations of the Study

While this analysis focuses on a single short story and theoretical reader positioning, future research may expand this framework through comparative or empirical reader-response studies across cultural contexts.

5. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that *The Innocents* generates meaning primarily through readers' affective and ethical engagement rather than through explicit narrative explanation or moral instruction. Employing reader-response criticism as its analytical framework, the analysis has shown that interpretation unfolds through readerly sympathy, moral shock, and sustained indeterminacy. Taken together, these stages reveal a deliberate progression from affective alignment to ethical destabilization and ultimately to interpretive responsibility. These responses function not as incidental reactions but as structured mechanisms through which the text produces its ethical force.

The findings indicate that innocence in the story is constituted affectively rather than institutionally. Through narrative restraint and focalization, readers are positioned to experience Isobel's innocence, while institutional authority imposes a rigid interpretive framework that contradicts that experience. This disjunction between experiential recognition and doctrinal certainty generates the story's central ethical tension. Rather than portraying authority as overtly malicious, the narrative exposes how moral certainty, when insulated from alternative perspectives, can enable harm while preserving the appearance of virtue.

The analysis further demonstrates that moral shock operates as a mechanism of interpretive revision. As readerly trust in the convent collapses, the narrative foregrounds the dangers of interpretive rigidity and the ethical consequences of institutional logic. Meaning therefore emerges not solely from represented events but from readers' evolving evaluation of authority and its internal coherence.

The story's open ending consolidates this dynamic. By withholding psychological resolution, the narrative transfers responsibility from the text to the reader, compelling imaginative projection beyond the final page. Indeterminacy thus functions not as ambiguity for its own sake but as a structural strategy that sustains ethical engagement.

Theoretically, this study advances reader-response criticism by synthesizing transactional theory, affective stylistics, reception aesthetics, and textual gap theory to demonstrate how sympathy, moral shock, and indeterminacy operate together as mechanisms of ethical positioning. It further contributes to literary ethics by showing how narrative form can expose the fragility of moral authority without relying on overt ideological commentary.

This study is limited to a single short story and relies on theoretical reader positioning rather than empirical reception data. Future research may extend this framework through comparative analyses of similarly unsettling narratives or through empirical reader-response studies that examine how cultural contexts shape ethical interpretation.

Ultimately, the enduring force of *The Innocents* lies in its capacity to unsettle readers and transform interpretation into ethical reflection. Ethically disturbing fiction does not merely represent moral conflict; it repositions readers as active participants in the production of ethical meaning.

References

- Fernandez-Quintanilla, C. (2020). Textual and reader factors in narrative empathy: An empirical reader response study using focus groups. *Language and Literature*, 29(2), 124–146. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0963947020927134>
- Fernandez-Quintanilla, C., & Stradling, F. (2023). Introduction: Stylistic approaches to narrative empathy. *Journal of Literary Semantics*, 52(2), 103–121. <https://doi.org/10.1515/jls-2023-2008>
- Fernandez-Quintanilla, C. (2025). Analyzing narrative empathy in readers' responses to literature: A taxonomy of linguistic evidence of empathetic responses. *Narrative*, 33(1), 90–114. <https://doi.org/10.1353/nar.00012>
- Fish, S. (1980). *Is there a text in this class? The authority of interpretive communities*. Harvard University Press.
- Iser, W. (1974). *The implied reader: Patterns of communication in prose fiction from Bunyan to Beckett*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Iser, W. (1978). *The act of reading: A theory of aesthetic response*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Jauss, H. R. (1982). *Aesthetic experience and literary hermeneutics* (M. Shaw, Trans.). University of Minnesota Press.
- Keen, S. (2006). A theory of narrative empathy. *Narrative*, 14(3), 207–236. <https://doi.org/10.1353/nar.2006.0015>
- Khan, S., & Wakeel, M. (2025). Literary depictions of mental health and trauma in contemporary English fiction. *Journal of Media Horizons*, 6(2), 777–791. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15728426>
- Phelan, J. (2011). Rhetoric, ethics, and narrative communication: Or, from story and discourse to authors, resources, and audiences. *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 94(1/2), 55–75. <https://doi.org/10.2307/41200942>
- Rosenblatt, L. M. (1995). *Literature as exploration* (5th ed.). Modern Language Association of America.
- Rowe, P. (2000). The innocents. In C. Bird (Ed.), *The Penguin century of Australian stories* (pp. 669–677). Penguin Books Australia.
- Suleiman, S. R., & Crosman, I. (Eds.). (1980). *The reader in the text: Essays on audience and interpretation*. Princeton University Press.