

# **Committing An Affair In The Marriage Life: Readers' Interpretation Of Virginia Woolf's "the Legacy"**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Producing the interpretation of a literary work can be done by giving responses toward the work and employing the subjective criticism, one strain of the reader-response theory, can analyze that interpretation. This paper was aimed at describing and analyzing individual responses and the communal interpretations produced by the readers of Virginia Woolf's "The Legacy", particularly toward its theme about the affair case happened in the marriage life. It was also to find out the involvement of the subjective motive the readers possessed toward the production of their individual responses and the communal interpretations. The findings show that the readers produced individual responses along with the symbolization of their subjective motive, in terms of the personal experience of affair case in the marriage life, the personal belief about that affair and love, and the reading experience. In those individual responses, it was found both the identical and the various individual responses formed by the readers. The production of this identical response involved the identical symbolization of the readers' subjective motive. The readers also had gone through the communal discussion and they approved two communal interpretations. Firstly, Angela's affair was common due to her unhappy marriage life condition. The reason was because the readers had experiences affair case similar to Angela's affair and her unhappy marriage life. This similar condition between Angela's affair and readers' personal experience influenced the readers to accept that as the communal interpretation. Secondly, the direct and indirect personal experience of affair case could cause a different position in responding to Angela's affair. It was because the distance the readers had. Another point was revealed that the readers had involved their subjective motive as the symbolization consciously.

**Keywords:** Interpretation, subjective criticism, individual response, symbolization, and communal interpretation.

## **A. INTRODUCTION**

In the literary world, each genre is actually dedicated to its readers and those readers may bring various roles to a literary work. Basically, a reader is the one who reads and gives meaning to the literary work. At the mean time, during or after the reading process, whether a reader will sit passively or move actively determines his or her particular role as a reader. A role

of a reader that used to be believed and assumed to be the only possible role is the passive role of a reader. This illustrates a reader who reads a literary work as if he or she were a sport spectator sitting passively, just absorbing the contents of the artistic creation of that literary work and allowing it to dominate his or her own thoughts. As a result, such a reader brings little to the text and, therefore, it is the text that provides all that is needed to interpret a certain meaning of the text itself. In short, readers' role is so passive that he or she is not involved in shaping the interpretation of a literary work.

On the other side, another role of a reader that may have enlightened the study of a literary work and that becomes the basic assumption of the reader-response theory is the role of a reader as the active audience, or the re-creator of the literary work he or she reads. This role is closely related to the further action taken by a reader, namely recreating the literary work itself. The view on the importance of readers' role has enlightened the study of a literary work since 1920s, when for the first time Richards proposed to catalogue the readers' strategies for understanding and interpreting poetry (Davis, 1986:345). Unlike the previous concern of the study of a literary work, he turned directly to the steps readers go through as they read. He evaluated and analyzed his students' free responses and he came to a certain conclusion. He acknowledged that a reader might bring to the text a vast array of ideas amassed through life's experience, including previous literary experience, and apply such information or experience to the text. By doing so, the reader is no longer considered as the passive receiver of a text, but he or she is an active participant in the creation of a text's meaning. As a result, this conclusion becomes a turning point from the belief of passive role of a reader to the active one in which he acts as the re-creator of the text he reads.

Meanwhile, from the late 1960s through the present, modern reader-response theory has emerged and the meaning of readers as the re-creators concentrates exclusively on what readers do next and how they do it. Such a belief of placing the reader as the re-creator may become one important view to consider that a reader can do more than just reading a literary work. It means that placing the role of a reader as the re-creator makes the reader as the primary concern of the study of a literary work.

Concerning the role of a reader as the re-creator, Evans (1987:23) explains that the role of the reader as a re-creator is mainly a duty to recreate the literary work he or she reads after the reading process. Further, Evans also implies that placing the reader as the re-creator is one way to shape and to understand the interpretation of the printed text of the literary work. The reason is, just like what Iser in Evan (1987:23) writes, the meaning of literary works remains related to what the printed text says, but it still requires the creative imagination of the reader to put it all together. In short, it is believed that the interpretation of a literary work is created by the reader of the literary work as a creative imagination. Thus, how a certain literary work tells and shows the reader its aim, still, the meaning or the interpretation of it depends on the creative imagination experienced by the reader.

Therefore, this paper will describe and present how the meaning of a literary work is shaped by using the reader-response theory. A chosen literary work is a short story written by Virginia Woolf namely "The Legacy". People who have read Virginia Woolf's "The Legacy" might find out that a dominating idea within the story is about a case of committing an affair in the marriage life. A case of committing an affair in the marriage life committed by a wife, named Angela has been a dominant issue of the story. The affair itself was a secret one, and Gilbert, her husband found it out after her death by reading her diary dedicated as her "legacy" to him. This issue is multi-interpretable and it demands on how the readers (the respondents of this study) will see, understand and finally respond differently. By presenting this paper, the writer tries to

demonstrate what the individual responses and the communal interpretations are and how their personal experiences influence the way to give meaning to Virginia Woolf's "The Legacy" on the case of committing an affair in the marriage life.

### **B. On Reader-Response Theory**

The main focus of the reader-response theory is different from that of other approaches in analyzing the meaning or the interpretation of a literary work. Iser in Thompson (1992:12) illustrates that the reader-response theory shifts the critical focus from the text to the reader. It means that the point of difference lies on the reader as the analysis focus. In the same way, Bressler (1999:67) also explains that the reader-response theory diverts the emphasis away from the text as the sole determiner of meaning to the significance of the reader as an essential participant in the reading process and the creation of meaning. Both explanations above place a reader of a literary work as an active participant along with the text in the production of interpretation of that literary work from the point of view of the reader-response theory. Furthermore, this placing a reader becomes an active participant will then give another view of a reader's role itself.

Reader-response theory tends to be divided into three strains (Davis, 1986:346). Those are structuralism, phenomenology and subjective criticism. These various approaches or strains can be distinguished from one another according to where the scholars place the locus of the meaning. The locus of the meaning might be placed in the text, in the reader or in the relationship between the two. Finally, it springs a fact that different placing of its locus of meaning will then create some different approaches.

In this study, the writer focuses on a particular strain of the reader-response theory in terms of the subjective criticism. It is because this strain places the greatest emphasis on a reader and his or her subjective knowledge and motives in the interpretative process. Besides, in the subjective criticism a reader's thoughts, beliefs and experiences play a greater part than the actual text in shaping a work's meaning. Finally, these two basic reasons exactly meet with this study. It is going to be about namely to describe and to analyze a reader's response contained the symbolization of his or her subjective motives and the communal interpretation among the community of readers.

### **C. On The Subjective Criticism**

The theoretical starting point of the subjective criticism is the subjective paradigm. Different from those of other paradigms have promoted, as a new paradigm Bleich (1978:15) describes that the generality of the subjective paradigm lies on the ground that the access of human beings to the world is necessarily subjective. It can be seen obviously when further Bleich gives an example that all knowledge whether it is mathematical or humanistic has a subjective motive. It implies that it is also subjectivity that will open human beings access to knowledge in this world. In addition, Bleich's argumentation that even objective reality is a construction of a subordinate function of people's subjective perspective can also be seen as a strong supporting point of his assumption upon the subjective paradigm.

Furthermore, the best idea of the subjective paradigm that every single perspective including its subjective motive will spring the same analogy that in literature, particularly on the act of interpretation of a single text has its subjective motive from its reader as well. Based on this simple analogy, it will lead into the ordinary fact that when each person says what he or she sees or responds to what he or she reads, each person will be substantially different and varied.

It is because each person's perception is essentially different for he or she involves his or her very own varied subjectivity; though later on it still possible to find similarities in these substantially different responses. This simple analogy is actually supported by Bleich's further explanation on the relation of subjective paradigm and subjective criticism to a study of literature. Bleich (1978:99) concludes that finally the subjective criticism will actively integrate the study of reading and interpretation with the experience. This ordinary fact is essentially the basic assumption of the subjective paradigm seeing how the study of aesthetic experience shall be conducted.

#### **D. The Response and the Symbolization**

In the subjective criticism the meaning of a text depends entirely on a process delivered by its readers; in this frame of reference, readers fall into the category of subjects. Subjects are people, or especially readers, who can speak, read and write. The most that a reader can do with the real object, the text, is to see it, in other words, it is meant that readers are to read and to speak and to write about it. This process of creating meaning or giving initial perception of the textual object is called the symbolization. Symbolization takes place in the mind of the reader and this initial symbolization is what Bleich call the response. The reason why Bleich calls the response as symbolization is, as its name suggests, symbolization is transferring a symbolic object's existence to a real object's physical existence by delivering response statements. This in line with Bleich (1978:147) has suggested that the personal symbolizations can be shared with the aid of response statements. Meanwhile, the efforts to understand that response statement further is a process called resymbolization and Bleich calls this as interpretation.

Generally, a response is defined as the experience of perceiving an object in evaluative way. Meanwhile, Bleich (1978:65-6) considers the response as symbolization because this evaluative perception, or the response itself, involves converting a real object to a symbolic one. It means that a real object is a text and text's existence or meaning is shaped by the perception by the aid of response statement, which is actualized by the use of language as a symbol object. Besides, symbolization occurs in the perception, identification of experience and also its relation to consciousness of that experience. At this point of understanding, Bleich (1978:65) constructs the conception of symbolization as a symbolic explanation of experience.

#### **E. The interpretation and the Resymbolization**

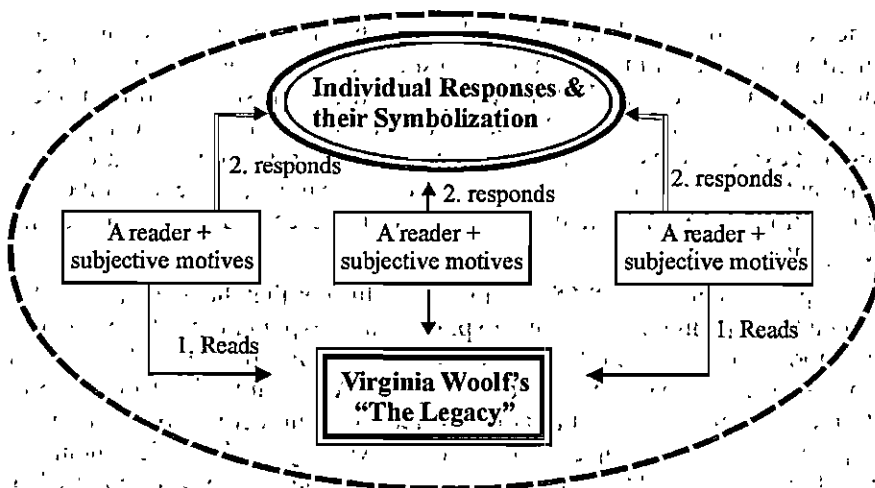
Since the very beginning, Bleich has emphasized that the response is symbolization and it is the immediate motive for interpretation of a single text. It means that when these responses or symbolization are collected communally then they will shape and form the communal interpretation of that single text. Besides, those responses are also developed communally meaning that explanations how these responses or symbolization given are being involved. The explanation being argued and involved are called as the resymbolization. It is resymbolization of the conceptualization of why one perceived the object in evaluative way and then symbolized it.

At this point, Bleich (1978:65) demonstrates further that the idea of resymbolization is both an explanation of language used and explanation of explanation. Therefore, it can be said that the resymbolization is when the symbolizations are investigated its language use and its explanation of why a certain symbolization may occur. As a result, Bleich (1978:98) tries to put interpretation as resymbolization that is motivated by a subjective urge to understand one's evaluative perception of an object. Furthermore, Makaryk (1999:172) mentions that the subsequent interpretation and the public presentation of the symbolization are what so-called resymbolization. To sum up, resymbolization can be identified when there is public presentation and its explanation occurring during the communal development among readers.

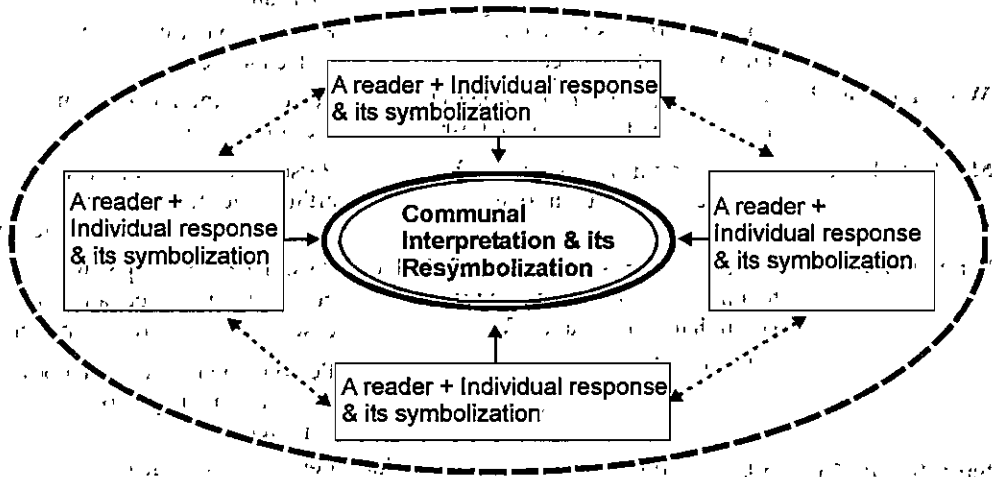
Thus, Bleich's proposal to call interpretation as resymbolization is actually a way to objectify responses or symbolization by the aid of response statement since there are explanations of explanation from symbolization. Besides, resymbolization also involves public representation as a form of public acceptance that, in fact, it is also a proof to objectify the response or symbolization itself. Thus, conceptualization of communal interpretation or resymbolization is actually a conceptualization of objectification of individual responses or personal symbolization.

The distinction between symbolization and resymbolization corresponds respectively to the use of language as simple denotation and as complex explanation. Symbolization arrives at the first impression of a text, its simple denotation whereas resymbolization works when readers become aware that a symbolic objectification system, or symbolization, is unsatisfactory. As a result, readers communally try to resymbolize or explain it. Such explanation can actually change the object of attention. The motive for such important changes grows from personal and communal subjectivity. Thus, resymbolization reworks on established symbols in a direction that more adaptive to present needs. These presents need proposed by the community of readers can be solved by having negotiations. To conclude, the explanations demanded and negotiated by readers resymbolize all items under inquiry and the community that originally seeks explanation will validate the resymbolization. Finally, this sort of explanation is commonly known as interpretation as Bleich has suggested (1978:67). Therefore, so far Bleich's explanations of symbolization and resymbolization are ways to propose individual response and communal interpretation become something acceptable in terms of acceptable knowledge in the study of literature. A further illustration of these two processes is provided in the following two figures.

Figure 1.  
Scheme of Producing an Individual Response and its Symbolization



**Figure 2**  
**Scheme of Producing a Communal Interpretation and its Resymbolization**



**F. On Readers' Interpretation on Virginia Woolf's "The Legacy"**

Within the responses produced by each reader of Woolf's "The Legacy", the individual responses can be found along with the symbolization. Each reader shapes his or her individual responses in which the subjective motives are involved and emerge as the symbolization of the individual responses. The subjective motives are in the form of the personal experience, personal belief and the reading experience that mostly lead to the issue of an affair case happening in the marriage life. Besides, it also can be pointed out the similarity and various individual responses toward Woolf's "The Legacy."

| No | NAME        | INDIVIDUAL RESPONSE  | SYMBOLIZATION  |
|----|-------------|--|--|
| 1  | Rms/m/23    | Angela's affair is a quite ordinary affair.  | There are many affair cases happening around him and mostly kept secretly.   |
|    |             | Angela's affair is not normal because it is committed by Angela.                                       | Affair cases are mostly committed by the husbands.   |
|    |             | Angela's affair is bad and it is a marriage betrayal.  | Personal belief: an affair case is basically bad.  |
| 2  | Ethan/m/22  | Angela's affair is normal to happen due to her unhappy marriage life.                                  | The similarity in his personal experience that an unhappy marriage life is a primary cause of an affair case.                    |
|    |             | Angela's affair is not to be blamed.   | The personal experience and the reading experience   |
| 3  | Bob/male/22 | Angela's affair is not just a usual affair, but it is a journey of seeking a true love.                | Personal belief: a true lover.   |
|    |             | Angela's affair is normal to happen for she is lonely and she needs love in her unhappy marriage life. | Personal belief: a love relationship is a true love between the two sole mates and it doesn't come from the personal experience. |

|   |                 |  |   |
|---|-----------------|--|---|
| 4 | Kiki/female/21  | Angela's affair is bad thing to do.  | Personal experience : her own feeling when her mother committed an affair.                      |
|   |                 | Angela's affair is to be blamed, but not totally blamed.   | Personal experience : the consequence   |
| 5 | Witty/female/22 | Angela's affair is normal due to her marriage condition, a busy husband                                  | Personal experience having the similar background   |
| 6 | Sky/Female/21   | Angela's affair is a positive affair, because it is based on love.                                       | Personal experience: a negative affair, Reading experience: novel springing the affair theme.   |
| 7 | Sekar/female/22 | Angela's affair is a common affair due to a particular reason behind it, i.e. Her unhappy marriage life. | Personal belief shaped by the personal experience: an affair case must have a reason behind it. |
|   |                 | Angela's affair is bad.  | Personal belief from the norm and the religion and personal experience.                         |
| 8 | Santi/female/26 | Angela's affair is normal to happen due to her unhappy marriage life.                                    | Personal experience: She experiences it herself.  |

The identical individual responses are identified from the individual responses produced by Rms, Ethan, Witty, Kiki, Sky and Santi. Although the identical responses are expressed in such a different diction, they actually lead to one statement namely Angela's affair is common or normal to happen due to their unhappy marriage. The emergence of this identical individual response is supported by the identical symbolization from their subjective motives. The symbolization appears based on their personal experience in which most affairs happen because the doer of an affair has an unhappy marriage life. In other words, the personal experience that influences the readers to say such an identical individual response has something in common with what Angela faces in the story of Woolf's "The Legacy".

The various individual responses are produced by all of the respondents. They produce various individual responses i.e. 1) Angela's affair is a positive affair, 2) Angela's affair should not be blamed and 3) Angela's affair is a journey of true love, 4) Angela's affair is not normal, 5) Angela's affair is bad and 6) Angela's affair should be blamed. Since these are various individual responses, each of those individual responses emerged is underlain by various symbolization from various personal experience, personal belief and reading experience of the affair case those readers have. Readers are able to produce various individual responses because they have various personal experiences of affair cases. It becomes their influential factor in producing those individual responses. The emergence of those various individual responses is acceptable in the study of the reader-response theory because all individual responses shaped by the readers are considered valid interpretation.

Above all, another point to study related to the emergence of those individual responses, both the identical and the various ones is about the consciousness that the readers acknowledge in involving their subjective motives within those individual responses. This circumstance can be remarked as a significant point, as it is argued by the subjective criticism, that readers and their subjective motive really have worked together in the making meaning of a certain text, in this case is Woolf's "The Legacy".

In the communal negotiation, there are two communal interpretations shaped and approved by the readers of Woolf's "The Legacy". Those two communal interpretations are formed based on the agreement on the identical individual response and the different position or tendency found in the individual responses produced by the readers with different distance of their subjective motives, particularly their personal experience.

The first communal interpretation is revealed by the identical individual response. It means that it is produced from the similarity of needs the readers have. The readers negotiate and finally agree that Angela's affair becomes something common to happen due to her unhappy marriage life. This communal interpretation is shaped based on the same understanding the readers have toward Angela's affair and the reason causing her affair. At last, this communal interpretation also functions as the interpretation the readers shape toward Woolf's "The Legacy".

The agreement of this communal interpretation is supported by the resymbolization the readers have in the forms of their explanation and acceptance of that communal interpretation. Besides, those resymbolizations also give the explanation of the symbolic explanation or what so-called the symbolization from the readers and the public presentation of that communal interpretation. The readers are able to spring the exclusive public presentation meaning that the public presentation emerged is only based on the belief and experience they have. In other words, they assume that other readers who do have subjective motives of an affair case in the marriage life will never agree with their first communal interpretation toward Woolf's "The Legacy".

The second communal interpretation resulted by the communal negotiation is based on the various individual responses leading to a different position in judging the affair committed by Angela. The community of readers agrees that the directness of personal experience influences the readers to decide their judgment to Angela's affair case. This means that the distance the readers have toward an affair case will raise such a different position and tendency to see the affair case in the story of Woolf's "The Legacy". At the same time, the readers agree that the public presentation is the public presentation of public in general, meaning that the public presentation may exist in the society. It means that such a conception becomes a natural consideration possibly brought by people in the society.

### **G. Beyond The Readers' Interpretations**

Based on the findings on the readers' individual responses and the communal interpretation explained before, there are two significant points that can be discussed. The first point deals with the consciousness the readers have showed in involving their subjective motives in the production of their individual responses toward an affair case committed by Angela in Woolf's "The Legacy". This becomes significant to be discussed because it can show that the readers are so close to their subjective motives in terms of the personal experience, personal belief and the reading experience in the production of a literary work's interpretations as the subjective criticism has suggested.

The first point to discuss is based on the fact that the readers of Woolf's "The Legacy" consciously involve their subjective motives in the production of their individual responses to Woolf's "The Legacy", particularly toward its theme. As it is described previously, each reader realizes that his or her subjective motives are involved in the way they shape their responses to Angela's affair case. In this case, the readers' subjective motives are in the forms of their personal experiences on the affair case happening in the marriage life, their personal belief on the case of committing an



affair in the marriage life and the meaning of love in general, and their reading experiences working together. Furthermore, by asking the readers directly, the researcher is able to investigate the readers' consciousness in involving their subjective motives. As a result, based on the findings, it shows that all readers realize that they have engaged their subjective motives in giving responses to Angela's affair, though it is in a different level. Finally, this circumstance springs a certain meaning in the exploration of the readers' individual response and its relation with the theory being used, namely the subjective criticism.

Besides focusing on the fact that readers bring along with them their subjective motives in giving response to a certain text, the subjective criticism also emphasizes that the symbolization found in each individual response has a close relationship to those subjective motives particularly to a certain experience the readers have. This further means that the symbolization or the explanation of symbolic experience will occur in the perception, the identification of experience and also its relation to consciousness of that experience. Up to this point of understanding, it can be understood that the readers' consciousness in involving the subjective motives is actually one way that correlating each other with the emergence of the symbolization within their individual response. It means that in a certain individual response if there is the symbolization appearing, at the same time, it can be remarked that the reader involves his or her personal experience, personal belief or those reading experience consciously. Finally, it can be said that a reader's consciousness involvement of personal experience is a way to objectify that the personal experience owned could be regarded as the factor influences much in the production of individual responses to the story of Woolf's "The Legacy".

In conclusion, the consciousness that the readers realizes in the making of responses toward Woolf's "The Legacy" particularly in the affair case committed by Angela is an actual proof that the subjective motives have a close relationship with readers in the production of responses. Those subjective motives are inherently embodied within a reader's mind and, therefore, when he or she gives responses to Woolf's "The Legacy", those subjective motives will immediately emerge and its emergence can be felt consciously

The second point is related to a slight different position that the readers present within their individual responses toward Angela's affair case. This different position the readers show in their individual responses actually has been acknowledged by the readers themselves as one of the communal interpretations toward the story of Woolf's "The Legacy". Therefore, the significant reason to discuss the two points above is because the former will show that the readers has consciously involved their subjective motives in responding to the story whereas the latter can prove that the readers are much influenced by the 'distance' of those subjective motives. As a result, these two points above will be in line with what the subjective criticism has argued about so far that it will actively integrate the study of reading and interpretation with the experiences.

Basically, the second point is significant because a slight different position the readers present within their individual responses toward Angela's affair case. In this case, as it has been illustrated before, the reader with her direct personal experience of an affair case in the marriage

life tends to state her position in such an abstain way, meaning that she is unable to make any judgment and even she unwillingly makes it. On the other hand, the readers with their indirect personal experiences have a tendency to state clearly where their positions are. It means that they can take a side to Angela's affair, agree on it or they even can extremely blame Angela's affair.

Based on these two distinctions, it can be said that the directness of the personal experiences plays an important role in the individual response and the judgment made by the readers. This condition is remarked as the circumstance of creating the distance. The researcher identifies the direct and indirect personal experiences the readers have as the distance of their personal experiences to the production of responses toward literary text they have read. It further means that the distance or the direct and indirect status gives such a specific consideration for a reader to produce his or her further judgment or the position state toward Angela's affair case. Therefore, at last, a reader with her direct personal experience prefers to produce such a judgment toward the affair case in the story of Woolf's "The Legacy".

In accordance with the subjective criticism as the underlying theoretical point, this different position the readers show based on their direct and indirect personal experience of an affair case in the marriage life can spring a certain conception in the understanding of the subjective motive itself. In giving responses to Woolf's "The Legacy", the reader with her direct personal experience is really placed as the realistic side of a reader upon the short story. It means that such a reader is the one who closely similar to the character in the story. As a result, she is placed in a difficult situation to give judgment upon what she has done in the reality. Therefore, she may feel the same way when she has to give judgment to Angela's affair case and Woolf's "The Legacy" may function as a particular reflection for herself and her personal experience. Therefore, from this circumstance it can be inferred that besides the subjective motives a reader has, the distance toward that subjective motive may also be another influential factor for a reader to produce his or her responses to a certain literary work. The same personal experience may have created an identical response among readers, but a distance of that subjective motive can also influence a reader to shape another different response among others.

To sum up, the readers' different position to Judge Angela's affair case may reflect a certain standpoint in the discussion of the subjective criticism. The readers' consciousness can be an actual proof that the subjective motives have a close relationship with readers in the production of responses, but the readers' same personal experiences with a different distance may spring another standpoint. Thus far, it can be seen that the identical personal experience of an affair case may spring various individual responses both a different individual response and the same one. However, the identical personal experience with a different distance of it can cause such a different tendency in responding to the literary work.

## **H. CONCLUSION**

This study shows how strong the relation of giving meaning and subjective motive possessed by readers is. The individual responses have been produced consciously along with their symbolization. It means that readers are able to give meaning on the literary work while involving consciously their subjective motives represented as their symbolizations. Meanwhile, the communal interpretations have been approved and produced along with their resymbolization. It shows also the acceptance from each reader. The result has proven the relationship between the subjective motive and the production of meaning as the main locus of study of subjective criticism from the reader-response theory.

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