

DECODING THE TEXT AND THE 'POWER' OF THE READER

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ABSTRACT

The process of interpretation and understanding of a literary text has always been thought of as an exercise controlled by either the text or the author. The reader has been given a peripheral role in the process of producing meaning. The recent emphasis on the reader as a very important entity, not just a 'tabula rasa' (Locke, 1996) gathers its strength from the new perspective in which the reading process is viewed. The philosophical notions developed by Edmund Husserl and Roman Ingarden, and the phenomenological theories of Schleiermacher and Don Ihde have paved way for the elevation of the reader to the position of the most important agent shaping and directing the process of decoding the meaning of a text. Literary theories proposed by Roman Ingarden, Hans Robert Jauss, Wolfgang Iser, Stanley Fish has brought the reader to the center stage. The gamut of ideas offered by these new groups of theoreticians has redefined the role of the text from an independent object into something that can only exist when it is read and when it interacts with the mind of the reader. This study describes how the philosophical notions combined with literary ideologies help the reader to emerge as the most powerful agent in the realization of the meaning of texts.

Keywords: phenomenology, intentional objects, historical situatedness, reception theory.

INTRODUCTION:

The long history of the theory of literature, from Plato to the present, is mainly centered on 'reading' and on the debate of deciding the most dominant factor that controls, decides and shapes the reading process. The history of theory records certain well known shifts of emphasis in this relation. Although there have been found different factors dominating this kind of shift of emphasis in different ages, they have been similar in their central propaganda, that is, each of them claims to have control over the reading process and this determines the outcome of reading. One can visualize a little scene on a darkened stage, with the persona of the author on one side, the reader on the other and the text placed between them. The spot light in this drama focuses on only one entity at a time and the light foregrounds one of them so brightly that the others fade into practical invisibility. Thus the focused element, whether the author or the text or the reader, has always been deemed to be the main controller of the 'reading' of the text.

Throughout the centuries, it becomes apparent, usually either the book or the author has been conceived as the guide to the reading process. The reader has tended to remain in shadow, taken for granted. Here or there, a theoretician may start to take the reader seriously when he or she discusses the reading of the literary text and its consequences. Yet, until recently, the reader has never been considered as the main component of the reading process. The recent emphasis on the reader as a very important entity, not just a 'tabula rasa' (Locke, 1996) gathers its strength from the new perspective in which the reading process is viewed.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

The existence of a single and already defined meaning incorporated in a literary text has been critically evaluated by several studies over the past few decades. In a sharp contrast to the already assumed notion of the author or the text functioning together to shape the meaning, recent studies have shown that every reader is the source of his or her interpretation of a text and this meaning is a product of the transaction of his or her personal associations with the text. The earliest trace of a study proposing the existence of a text dependent on the reader can be found in Louise Rosenblatt's much quoted work *Literature as Exploration* (Rosenblatt, 1938). In a reaction to the emphasis given on the autonomy of the text by the school of theorists known as New Critics, Rosenblatt (1938) advocated for the participation of the reader's personal predilections in the interpretation of a text. While New Critics supported a practice which called for rigid personal dissociations in the interpretation of literature, Rosenblatt (1938) believed that the process of reading of a text is the result of a unique and personal event involving the reader's mind, his or her emotions at a particular time and influenced by the unique conditions the reader is positioned. A similar focus on the freedom of reader is expressed by Rosenblatt (1978) in her famous work *The Reader, the Text, the Poem: The Transactional Theory of Literary Works*. In this study Rosenblatt emphatically expresses that he is opposed to the elevated position given to the text in the process of producing meaning and in the act of interpretation. By presenting the historical sequence of events from the eighteenth century when the author was deemed to be the dominant agent and the reader only an eavesdropper to the twentieth century focus on the text existing as an independent entity, Rosenblatt (1978) says that the reader had been put into 'unrelenting invisibility.' Putting forth her own theory, Rosenblatt (1978) hails the reader as the main agent in the process of interpretation as the textual meaning is not confined within the text, but emerges from the process of reader's interaction with the text. Stanley Fish (1980) in his famous book *Is There A Text In This Class* describes in detail the important role that the reader plays in realizing the meaning of a text. According to Fish (1980), the qualities of text do not result in the special kind of attention it receives from the reader. Rather, the process of paying some special kind of attention to a text leads to the emergence of its special features, its poetically distinctive aspects. However, there have also been studies raising objection to the kind of importance given to the reader in the process of production of meaning. Wimsatt and Beardsley (1954) opined that the elevated position given to the reader may result in impressionism and also in relativism, and this may lead to the disappearance of the poem as a product for critical judgment. Fish (1980) on the other hand upheld the independence of the reader by commenting that the text is not a wholly objective entity and the lines in a text expresses only those values and thoughts which the reader associate them with. In this way the reader is portrayed as the primary player in the process of interpreting a text.

PHILOSOPHY AND READING:

The question: how far does a text govern the reading process, and how far is the reading process controlled by the reader --- has attracted both philosophers and critics to look at 'reading' in details. The German philosopher, Edmund Husserl, with his notion of 'Intentionality of Consciousness' (McIntyre and Smith, 1989) provides a major turning point in the way the 'reading-reader relation' is looked at. Husserl's notion of 'Intentionality of Consciousness' says that consciousness is always consciousness of something. Different objects of consciousness are 'intentional objects' and there is no 'objectless consciousness and no unintended object.' Thus, to be an object something first of all has to be an object of consciousness. The application of Husserl's concept to literary discourse has initiated the rethinking of the ontology of the literary text. Gradually a point of view emerged which has initiated a discourse that explains that the existence of the literary text depends mainly on the application of the consciousness of the readers. A literary text emerges as a complete object only when it participates in an incoming consciousness. Thus prior to reading, this is, prior to the application of consciousness, the literary text is always incomplete. The literary text, only written, is an enfolded potential which can be realized through reading. This kind of rethinking of the ontology of the literary text is the contribution of phenomenology to literature, which in turn, is influenced by Husserl. The importance given to reading is also influenced by the notion developed by T S Kuhn (1962). T S Kuhn has shown that the emergence of a fact in scientific investigation through the process of establishing results is crucially related to the frame of reference that a particular scientific observer employs in his or her analysis of a particular object. Thus the way things are observed determines the understanding. In the same way, in literature, reading decides the understanding of the text. In this way the observer becomes an important entity.

The claim that understanding is ahistorical, made by Husserl, is challenged by Martin Heidegger, who introduced historicity in understanding (Martinez and Chan, 2009). For him understanding is not an autonomous, ahistorical human activity. There is no escape from the historical situatedness of understanding, because it is the ontological ground of the readers' being-in-the-world. The readers are human subject only because they are practically bound up with others and the material world. Thus the readers' understanding is associated with the material world in which they are situated. There is no contemporary philosopher more concerned with the situated nature of the readers' interpretations than Hans-Georg Gadamer (Malpas, 2013). His popularity in recent years is in no small part attributable to his radical insistence on the historical nature of understanding.

Gadamer claims that it is precisely our being-in-the-world with its prejudices and presuppositions that come into function during reading, and makes understanding possible. Reading is always conditioned to the 'horizon' in which we are situated. But it should not be thought of in terms of a fixed or closed standpoint, it never restricts our reading and understanding of a text. Reading always involves understanding which is processed by the fusion of our own 'horizon' within which the work itself is placed. Gadamer uses the term "affective historical consciousness" (Swayne, 2012) to refer to the effectivity of history from past to present put into function during reading. According to Gadamer:

"... all interpretations of the literature produced in the past results from an interaction between past and present. The attempts made by the reader to understand a work depends crucially on the questions which the reader's own cultural environment allows him or her to raise.... The reader's present perspective always participates in a relationship with the past, and at the same time the past can only be understood through the limited perspective provided by the present... a hermeneutical notion of 'understanding' does not completely dissociate the knower from the object in the familiar fashion of empirical science; contrary to this it considers understanding as a result of a 'fusion' between the past and the present." (Selden, 1997)

Gadamer claims that the past does not get done with, and remains intact and independent *besides* the present. Anything at time has an effect in the subsequent moment of time. Also, when a thing moves into subsequent time, there occurs a series of changing perceptions. Thus, a text written in past does not get identical response in the subsequent time. The reader in the present can not know an old text in its own term, the term in which it was received in its publication age. Still, mediated engagement is possible. The

mediated instrumentality is the text's effective history which is still operating in the present. The effective history is still operating in which the reader stands and to which the reader contributes. According to Gadamer, the mediated negotiation between the present reader and the past text is inevitable.

Interpretation and understanding of a text has been the central focus point of the philosophical study known as Hermeneutics and much of the Gadamer's views on interpretations can be described as Gadamerian Hermeneutics. The German philosopher Schleiermacher has also expressed his advocacy towards the necessity of hermeneutics. Iser (2000) defines hermeneutics as a theory of interpretation of texts which tries to elucidate the way the process of understanding accomplishes itself (Iser, 2000). Iser (2000) suggests that hermeneutics describes the stage when interpretation reaches the point of becoming self-reflective and this leads to the process of continual and rapid self-monitoring of its functions and eventually this results in thematizing of what involves during the activity of interpretation itself." Don Ihde, the American philosopher, opines that hermeneutics can be broadly described as interpretation, and the rules that forms an interpretation" (Ihde, 1986). According to Paul de Man (1982) hermeneutics is a process which analyzes the way meaning is determined.

THEORY AND READING:

Theories concerning the understanding and production of meaning of a literary text have developed various critical perspectives. When the question – how does the reading of the literary text take place – is asked, there have been found various answers proposed by various theorists. However, the theoretical assumptions concerning reading and understanding show a trend towards shifting away from the historical situatedness approach of Gadamer. Firstly, there are those who have used the ahistorical philosophical insight of Husserl as their starting point and have considered understanding as autonomous, ahistorical human activity. Husserl himself was of the notion that the structure of consciousness can be studied according to rigorous logic after one has eliminated from one's mind all common assumptions, leaving only the necessary logical structure available for analysis. Thus the object of understanding can also be analyzed leaving aside the historical context of the reader.

Roman Ingarden is one of the theorists who has developed Husserl's notion and considers 'reading' out of the context of history. He considers the literary work as fully dependent on the act of consciousness that functions over it. The literary text, he considers, contains many gaps to be filled up by the reading process. "There are 'gaps', 'blanks', 'spots' of indeterminacy in the text, which, by the process of reading is filled up and is transformed from an artifact into aesthetic object." Ingarden uses the term 'concretization' (Takei, 1984) to designate reading. It refers to the potential getting realized. Although this activity is often unconscious, for Ingarden, it is an essential part of the apprehension of literary work. Without concretization the aesthetic work with its present world would not emerge from the 'schematic structure'. By schematic structure Ingarden refers to the notion of a skeleton or fixed structure in the text. "Even though concretization can be subject to vast variation corresponding to different reader, there remains the 'skeleton' whose reconstruction can provide some sort of guarantee as to what constitutes a valid or invalid reading.

A similar approach is taken by Hans Robert Jauss. He says that reading is determined by the "horizon of expectation" (Jauss, 1982), a term by which Jauss designated the shared set of assumptions which can be attributed to a given generation of readers. "He borrows from the philosophy of science (Kuhn, 1962) the term 'paradigm' which can be understood as the framework of scientific concepts in vogue and widely accepted in particular period. Ordinary science always undertakes its investigations within the philosophical and theoretical assumptions of a particular paradigm popular in a particular period and this process continues till a new model substitutes the old one and highlights new issues and constructs new philosophical and theoretical beliefs. In the same way reading is also subject to the horizon of expectations of a particular period. According to Jauss (1982) the horizon of expectations is shaped by the reader's knowledge and experience of the life and customs of the world all of which normally have an effect on every human being and thus on the reader too.

The most recent development in the growing emphasis given to reading is associated with the 'reception theory', one of the main contributors to which was Jauss himself. However, Jauss's notion of

horizon of expectation is somewhat related to the notion of history as it associates reader's perspective with his or life experience. According to Jauss (1982), the societal orientation of literature manifests itself only when the literary experience of every reader becomes part of the horizon of expectation. This kind of approach draws a fine line of distinction between Jauss's perspective and the approach of Reception theory of Wolfgang Iser. Reception theory examines the reader's role in literature and thus asks the question --- 'what is involved in the act of reading?' Wolfgang Iser of the Constance Scholl of reception theory discusses this question in detail. Iser is concerned primarily with individual text and how readers relate to it. Although he does not exclude social and historical factors, they are subordinate to the detailed considerations of the reading process itself. Thus Iser comes closer to the interpretative orientations of New Criticism.

What has interested Iser from the outset is the question of how and under what condition a text has a meaning for a reader. In contrast to the traditional interpretation, which has sought to elucidate a hidden meaning in the text prior to reading, he wants to see meaning as the result of a possible interaction and association between the text and the reader. The text is an "effect to be experienced" through reading, not an "object to be defined." Ingarden's conception of the literary work of art thus provides a useful framework for Iser's investigation. Thus the act of reading as a process becomes important through which meaning is constituted. Like Ingarden, Iser regards the text as a skeleton of "schematized aspects" and considers the text containing potential that must be concretized and actualized through the reading process.

For Iser, reading always aims at approximating the "Implied reader's" (Iser, 1974). By the term 'Implied reader', Iser means a textual structure and the real reader has the capacity of actualizing a text's meaning maximally. The general historical reader has to approximate this 'Implied reader'. The root of the 'implied reader' is there firmly etched in the discourse presented in the text, whom the reader creates for itself and consists of a network of clues, signals which would direct that kind of reading methodology which would actualize its (the text's) potential maximally. But during reading the reader is not able to grasp all these signals, but some of them and makes an interpretation --- a shape or configuration. Iser claims that reading results in the formation of a shape in itself which is partial to the potential text, which is infinitively richer than any of its realizations.

Reading is the discovery of the 'repertoire' of the text. By 'repertoire of the text', Iser means, the underlying codes which govern the meaning of a text, and which are alien from the codes of customary communication between people in day to day life. In a day-to-day communication situation, the speaker and the recipient share the same conventions and procedures, the latter comprehends the force of the speech act, and hence its meaning from the situational context. Thus the success of a linguistic action of communication is crucially dependent on the resolution of all the contextual indeterminacies with the help of the available conventions and procedures. Literary text also requires a resolution of indeterminacies. But the literary text does not contain a frame of reference like the speech act. Thus a public code like a traffic board is easily understandable as the readers can easily decode the message there. But mere linguistic competence like understanding the traffic board is not sufficient for interpreting a literary text. Jonathon Culler (1975) in his *Structuralist Poetics* considers that literary competence is also required for decoding a literary text. Culler (1975) considers that this literary competence is a kind of grammar of literature, a formation of the rules and conventions of different genres, and this is acquired in educational institutions. On the other hand, literary texts contain idiosyncratic private codes. The reading process must first discover the codes underlying the text and this is the first step towards decoding the meaning following those codes. Here Iser comes closer to Ingarden. Iser's concept of 'repertoire' of the text can be related to a similar emphasis given to underlying codes and conventions in Structuralism.

Stanley Fish, the American critic, however does not consider reading as a matter of discovering what the text means, but a process of experiencing what it does to the reader (Fish, 1970). For him there are not textual signals outside of conventions that an interpretative community has already agreed upon. He insists that there is nothing "in the work itself", awaiting its release by the reader's interpretation.

THE EMERGENCE OF THE ACTIVE READER:

Reading always involves reader's imagination. It is a special experience of linearity, and it is not an

unproblematic fluent movement through the linearity. It involves the act of continuous modification of our experience as we read word after word, sentence after sentence. When we read a text, we continuously evaluate and perceive events with regard to anticipation and retrospection, anticipation of what may come next and retrospection of what we have already experienced. An unexpected occurrence will cause us to reformulate our expectations in accordance with this event and to reinterpret the significance we have attributed to what has already occurred. Thus reading, in Iser's sense, involves 'transformed memories' and 'modified expectations' of the reader and in this sense the reader becomes the most powerful agent in the process of interpreting a text.

Thus the action of reading and interpretation can be characterized as a kind of 'kaleidoscope of perspective' which consists of a tendency for the search of consistency. "While expectations may be continually modified, and images continually expanded, the reader strives, even if unconsciously, to bring together everything together in a consistent whole" (Iser, 1972). A text contains various spots which clamour to be connected into a gestalt. In confronting the various signs or schemata of a text, readers try to establish connections between them and lend coherence to their activity. Iser assumes that readers always form a gestalt in the process of participating in the meaning production (Iser, 1972). If something occurs that is at odds with an imagined gestalt, then the reader endeavours to make things consistent again through a series of revisions.

Iser talks about two functions involved in this process of 'consistency building.' The first one is "illusion making and illusion breaking." Without the formation of illusions, the unfamiliar world of text would remain unfamiliar. But through the illusions formed by the reader textual experience becomes accessible and comprehensible for the reader." The second function is "oscillation between involvement and observation." During the process of illusion building the reader comes across various 'alien associations' which cannot be fit into the already formed illusions. Thus the reading process constantly involves reshaping of the formed illusion in view of the alien associations. The reader is involved in illusion making, at the same time the reader observes whether this is consistent with the 'new experiences'. This makes reading a 'living event' and the reader an active agent.

CONCLUSION:

The history of literary comprehension and interpretation has put great focus on the role played by the author or the text in producing meaning. But recent studies have placed the reader on the center stage in the process of understanding and interpretation of a literary text. The discussion presented above shows how the reader can be most important stakeholder in the process of actualizing the potential of a literary text. At the same time, being the most dominant player in the process of decoding a literary text, the reader is also blessed by the knowledge of truth that a text carries along with it. Iser's most suggestive comments on reading concerns the effect on the subject. When we appropriate an alien experience foregrounded in the text, we simultaneously background our own previous experiences. Thus during reading we confront 'alien meanings' which are part of our hitherto unrecognized consciousness. Understood in this way, reading really affects a 'heightening of self-awareness which develops through the reading process" (Iser, 1972). The incorporation of the unfamiliar experience in the reader helps the reader to see the world from an alien perspective. Thus reading literature becomes a tool for expansion of identity.

It is this kind of therapeutic account of reading what Aristotle meant when he talked about the cathartic effect on the audience of tragedy --- "through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions" (Lucas, 1968). Thus, it seems that the reader is not totally ignored during centuries of theory. When Plato graciously but firmly excluded poets from his ideal Republic, it was because of the fear of the morally deleterious effect of poetry on the audience. Horace's doctrine that the aim of poetry should be 'to teach and delight' (Tate, 1928) also takes care of the reader. It is the didactic moralistic concern of the Victorians for the reader that produced the art-for-art-sake reaction. Yet throughout all these years the reader has never been given the center of the stage. The reader is usually cast as a passive recipient, who, only in recent times has surfaced as the master of the reading process and its consequences.

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