

Reading Literature A Dialectic of Schemata

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Abstract

Reading or receiving literature is an enterprise that concerns the reader's or receiver's attempt to interpret a single text in different ways. The reading experience, in this case, is intensely private and highly subjective. The real reader – it is too difficult to have an ideal reader – has his or her own idiosyncratic background, context, expectations, and interpretive strategies. Thus, research in psychology (especially schema theory), social history, gender studies, or other fields, is valid. This paper tries to fathom the slippery domain that concerns what happens when we read a certain literary text, what sensations and visions that immerse us while we are reading. It attempts to validate the opinion that the general function of literature is to affirm, refresh, reinforce, or change a reader's schemata.

The Reader and Reading Literature:

As it is the case of the writer (author), the case of the reader and his obligations has created dire problems in such a way that there is real need for fathoming its different dimensions. Talking about the author brings us eventually to the reader. By gearing literary studies to close reading, critics have actually stripped the author of any preconceived "intention" or meaning. Wimsatt and Beardsley (1972: 344) introduced the terms "intentional fallacy" and "affective fallacy" – the former is concerned with the reading that is not guided by the author's intention. There is, in this case, a distance between the authorial intention and the one inferred by the reader (his interpretation).

If Wimsatt and Beardsley have ruled out the authorial intention from the final understanding of the text, the French symbolists (their predecessors) did shift the whole intention to the reader. It was Paul Valery who stated forthrightly that there is a complete rift between subject and object, author and literary text. In any case, the meaning is something generated by the reader, "once published, a text is like a machine which each person may use as he will and as he can; there is no certainty of the maker's operating is better than the other." (Robson, 1982: 22). This is an indirect way of saying that the reader's responsibility starts when he is face to face with the published text. This is so clear in Robyn Penrose's (the heroine in David Lodge's *Nice Work*) speech when she airs her feelings, "In this place ... reading is

work. Reading is production. And what we produce is meaning.” (1989, 334) As for the “affective fallacy,” the emphasis is laid upon the necessity of separating the text and the effects it leaves (creates), the confusion between the poem and its results (what it is and what it does). (Wimsatt and Beardsley, 1972: 345)

There is also a feminist reading of texts and its characteristic attitude toward authors and their representation of women in general. The emphasis here is laid on how a woman is shown and the reaction of female recipients of such texts. This bias against women that can take the form of changing the author’s name (Marian Evans) into a male one (George Eliot) necessitates a different and opinionated type of reading. These ideologies show that the reader when embarking on the process of reading is actually equipped with certain experiences, concepts and views as well as assumptions from other texts. Graff (1989, 250) sums up this issue by stating that “texts do not fully interpret themselves. Any particular reading experience is determined not only by the text in question, but also by the choice of interests the reader brings to the text before reading it.”

It is important to stress that reading in the sense used here is not the amateurish or naïve one where the distance between the fictive and factual is obliterated. If the process of writing itself, particularly fiction, is some sort of “playing roles” i.e. adopting a role, pose, mask, or persona, (Kennedy, 1974: 32) the same holds true to the act of reading. In this respect, when there is a growing tendency to adopt the academic type of reading which seeks to banish the author from his original domain and replace it by “the implied author”, the voice or mask in the text itself. This is applicable to the reader. The reader is expected to be

more than a mere recipient, “it is the reader’s lot to control or ‘reauthor’ a text.” (Stepo, 1989: 828-9) The reader is put on equal footing with the producer of the text. He is no longer guided by any preconceived plan or underlying assumption. He is to practice his critical and analytical faculties which provide a great sense of self-assertion and faith in one’s own judgments. Also the traditional confusion between reading and commentary is disambiguated by Sholes’s (1974, 145) subtle view that “commentary is an anatomized reading. Reading is a systematized commentary.”

Throughout the history of literature, the role of the recipient has been highlighted whether in the form of auditor (in oral poetry), the audience of drama or the reader of fiction. So many theories have been formulated to delineate the role of this anonymous but ever-present element in the literary act. Beginning with Aristotle and his famous concept of ‘catharsis’ of the audience’s petty emotions of pity and fear, through Brecht’s view of ‘alienation’ and its basic defamiliarizing of dramatic elements to ensure a vital response, down to hermeneutics and its multiple interpretations, the angle of emphasis shifts to the reader or the viewer. This new freedom of shuffling angles of perception has led to more fruitful and rewarding readings of texts given. Thus the multiplicity or pluralism of readings varies according to the perspectives set by the reader or critic. Meaning, so it is claimed, is not intrinsic in the text nor is it confined to the author’s plans. Hence, there appeared the immense amount of interpretations of Hamlet, because all these would be pointless if Shakespeare had one valid meaning only. As Lodge (1984, 26) argues in one of his own novels, “every decoding is another encoding, though the words are fixed on the page.”

What happens when we read a certain text? What sensations and visions immerse us while we are reading a literary text? The perspectives that determine these readings are usually the phenomenological, hermeneutic, deconstructionist and receptionist ones. The phenomenological approach accentuates the convergence between text and reader. Thus the act of reading is defined as “essentially a sense-making activity, consisting of the complementary activities of selection and organization, anticipation and retrospection, the formulation and modification of expectations.” (Suleiman and Crosman, 1980: 23)

Modern hermeneutics serves as the bedrock of deconstruction in its deliberate obscuring or even obliterating the idea of ‘meaning’ or ‘purpose’. It draw upon Nietzsche’s views advocating that “whatever exists ... is again and again reinterpreted to new ends, taken over, transformed” (Ibid, 17) The term ‘interpretation’ itself carries negative implications as Sontag (1966, 15) sees it, “To interpret is to impoverish, to deplete the world ... in order to set up a shadow world of meanings.”

The poststructuralist or deconstructionist reading, however, is an offshoot of the hermeneutic view of the literary text. It has done its best to “deconstruct” the common assumptions of readings and readers so that at the end it gets more difficult to talk about this normal activity as it used to be in the past. Apart from the ‘birth’ of the reader which is usually achieved at the expense of the author’s authority, the deconstructionists represented by Jacques Derrida have driven a wedge into the common process of reading so that it becomes some sort of another production. Viewed from this angle, the reader is not merely a passive consumer, but a producer

or collaborator, participating actively in recreating or writing meanings. Derrida sees internal differences and continuous deferring of meaning in his quibbling term ‘différance’ as “constitutive of the literary text, this is parallel to the Lacan’s view of the human subject.”(New, 1999: 103) Reading, then, consists not only in “respecting the text, but breaking it up, maltreating it, preventing it from speaking.” (Barthes, 1977: 12) This excessive emphasis on the linguistic implications of the text exemplified by Barthes’s or Derrida’s statements is determined by the fact that there is a kind of rupture between form and content or in Riffaterre’s phrase “a poem (and by extension any literary text) says one thing and means another.” (Riffaterre, 1978: 165) Such views, however, are not thoroughly new if we recall the famous formalist dictum that a poem should not mean but be.

But the theory that enjoys much vogue nowadays is the reception theory that concerns itself with the reaction and responses of the reader. The names of Ingarden, Iser, Fish and Holland are common in any serious discussion about how the text received. The experiences, needs, and expectations of the reader have always been important factors to be considered. This dialectical relation between production and consumption or reception is formulated by Hans Robert Jauss (quoted by Holub, 1984: 57-8) saying that “literature and art only obtain a history that has the character of a process when the succession of words is mediated through the consuming subject – through the interaction of author and public.”

Significantly enough, any new reading seeks to find not only fresh interpretations but also to give the lie to the existing ones. But this new reading will soon be found

wanting like any other reading. This endless process of reading led Bloom (1975, 178) to infer that since no reading is conclusive, "all readings are misreadings." This does not mean, however, that such a process is not a completely open space. This view applies to Fish's (quoted by Gardner, 1982: 4) ambitious enterprise of stating that "Rather than restoring or recovering texts, I am in the business of making texts." Similarly, Iser (1976, 9) stresses the vital role played by the reader in this process, "it is in the reader that the text comes to life ... when the text begins to unfolds its potential." The potential meanings Iser has in mind are subjects to certain limits or controls emanating from the nature of the material given. Fish (1989, 70) reminds us that "While a literary text is distinguished by its openness to a number of readings, it is not open to any and all readings." Accordingly, 'reading' in the sense used by the reception theory is synonymous to criticism. The reader as visualized here is, practically speaking, the critic. De Man (1986, 107) puts the point like this, "criticism is a metaphor for the act of reading." In another context, Fish (1972, 4) transfers the whole emphasis to the realm of the reader, "the proposed object of analysis is not the work but the reader."

Such an overwhelming concentration on the role and contribution of the discerning reader which sometimes exceeds the author's raises questions about the value and necessity of such a rebirth. Also, such arguments bring to the fore the question whether the reader has ever been ignored throughout the history of literature so that such calls for his growing role are justified and legitimized. It is almost axiomatic to state that literature is necessarily reader-oriented because without the reader's

appreciation and recognition the whole literary process will be of no avail.

Obviously the reader's task is not always an easy one, especially in modernistic and postmodernistic texts. In this case, his task gets more and more demanding and complicated. In this respect, Hemingway's (1932, 192) theory of understatement or 'iceberg' typifies the growing difficulty of reading. As he recommends,

If a writer knows enough about what he is writing about, he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, he will have a feeling of those things as strongly as the writer had stated. The dignity of the iceberg is due to only one-eighth of its being above water.

Practically speaking, reading which is the most elementary human drive gets more and more difficult so the whole process becomes baffling. As a result, there is a need to draw demarcation lines between 'the mass audience' and 'discerning readers'. The discerning reader is free and released from any preconceived assumptions about a given text.

Schema: Definitions

The word 'schema' comes from the Greek word *σχῆμα* (schēma), which means *shape* or more generally *plan*. The Greek plural is *σχῆματα* (schēmata). In English, both 'schemas' and 'schemata' are used. In cognitive science, linguistics and philosophy an 'image schema' is a recurring pattern of spatial sensory experience that is reflected in human reasoning, understanding and language. It can also mean a set of

behaviours associated with a stereotype. (en.wikipedia.org)

A schema, also known as a scheme (plural: schemes), is a linguistic template or pattern together with a rule for using it to specify a potentially infinite multitude of phrases, sentences, or arguments, which are called 'instances' of the schema. It is, therefore, a complex system consisting of a template-text or schema-template: a syntactic string composed of significant words and / or symbols and also of blanks or other placeholders (letters, circled numbers, ellipses, ordinal number expressions like 'in the first' and 'the second', etc. (wik.ed.uiuc.edu) .According to Reber and Reber's (2001) definition, schema is a plan, a structure, and a programme, and so on.

In all or any of the meanings, schemas (schemata) are mental plans that are abstract and that they function as guides for action, as structure for interpreting information, as framework for solving problems. People use reference to a linguistic schema for comprehending a sentence, a paragraph, and a context. It is also a pattern imposed on complex reality or experience to assist in explaining it, mediate perception, or guide response. In addition, it is an internal representation of the world; an organization of concepts and actions that can be revised by new information about the world. (wik.ed.uiuc.edu)

Generally, a schema may be used in a wide variety of situations as a framework for understanding incoming information. In the field of knowledge, a schema exists in memory as something that a person knows. Structurally, it is organized around a theme. As for comprehension, a schema contains 'slots' that are filled by specific information in a text. (Mayer, 2003: 77)

What Do Schemas Do for Us?

Schemas allow us to form impressions. They affect how we may perceive, notice, and also interpret information. Unfortunately or fortunately schemata may bias encoding of social information. For example, people who come from different geographic locations may interpret a situation in one way while others, based on prior experience, may think it to be something totally different. Schemata also rely on encoding which is how we code what we may see, hear, smell, or touch in our minds. (Reber and Reber, 2001)

Where Did the Concept of a Schema Come from?

Frederic Bartlett, in 1932, first introduced the concept of the schema while working on constructive memory. He considered schemas a part of top-down processing. According to psybox.com (2002), Bartlett considered schemata to be "maps or structures of knowledge stored in long-term memory." (Cited in wik.ed.uiuc.edu)

Although there may be some debate over the origin of the concept of schema, some suggest that Piaget first introduced it in 1926, but the fact remains that Piaget believed humans develop through a series of qualitative stages built upon common knowledge he called schemata. In other words, a schema is a picture of what we know about life at a particular point of time. As a child develops, he tends to interpret experiences based on what he already knows; what his schema tells him. Piaget referred to this process of making the world fit into our schema as assimilation. If the experience does not fit into our model of knowledge, we begin to modify our schema. Piaget referred to this as accommodation. (LingualLinks Library, 1999)

It was from these teachings of schemata that Richard C. Anderson (Ibid), a

prominent educational psychologist, developed the “schema theory of learning.” Anderson’s learning theory describes schemata as knowledge that has been carefully organized into an elaborate network of abstract concepts by which we understand life and the world in which we live. These abstract concepts can only be interpreted and understood after a foundation of proven, relevant information has been established through past experiences. According to Anderson’s schema theory, our schemata are in a constant state of change as we encounter new experiences and new information that shape our schema. As we develop, we learn to broaden the boundaries of our schema to include more variables building on the foundation of what we already know.

Schema Theory and Literariness

In his 1994 book, Cook develops what he calls a “theory of the function of literary discourse” by drawing together the “relevant insights from literary theory and AI [artificial intelligence] text theory”. (Cook, 1994: 126) His starting-point is that literary texts differ from other literary texts in their function and that other theories for the function of discourse are not adequate to explain their function. (Ibid, 44)

Cook also surveys those developments in AI which might bear on his quest for a “theory of the function of literature.” He accepts that schema theory is perceived as useful by discourse analysts, but criticizes it for seeing knowledge (i.e. schemata) as fixed rather than flexible.

Cook’s important claim is that the use of schemata helps us to illustrate the general function of literature, which is to change people’s view of the world: “In some discourses, ..., language has a function not accounted for in the functional theories ...: the function of changing mental

representations.” (Ibid) Thus literary discourse is said to deviate from the norms that provide the readers’ expectations, and the effect is that the readers’ schemata will be challenged and changed by encountering this conflict.

Semino (1997) accepts the usefulness of schema theory for the analysis of poetry, and incorporates her own version of Cook’s (1994, 44) “cognitive change principle” into her account. Like Cook, she wants to incorporate in her definition of ‘literariness’ the ability of literary texts to challenge and modify the readers’ existing schemata. This leads to a cognitive approach to the definition of literariness whereby the main common characteristics of literary texts are their ability to “disrupt the ordinary application of schemata and their potential for causing schema change.” (Semino, 1997: 152) She accepts that Cook’s argument captures something that is central to the notion of literariness. It is true, she argues, that “we tend to associate literature (or at least some types of literature) with both linguistic creativity and with innovative, original thinking.” (Ibid, 154) A high degree of discourse of deviation, in other words, may well be the distinguishing feature of works that are considered prototypically literary (although this is probably truer of poems than of novels and plays).

Semino continues that Cook “does nevertheless seem to imply the existence of an almost necessary link between literary text and, minimally, schema refreshment.” (Ibid)

In essence, then, Cook is arguing that literariness is connected with this tendency to ‘refresh’ the readers’ schemata, whereas other, less radical genres, such as advertisements, tend to ‘reinforce’ the readers’ schemata – and by doing so, support the status quo.

Schema Theory and Literature

Semino (1997, 8), quietly rightly, wants to move beyond what she sees as the restrictions of 'possible world' theory, which contrasts fictional worlds with the 'actual' world, because

the notions of impossibility and counterfactuality do not exhaust the ways in which a text world may be perceived to be alternative in relation to what a particular culture regards as the 'real' world. Alternativity may arise from ... the breaking of expectations that do not depend on the general notions of possibility but on our knowledge of social and cultural conventions.

Accepting, for now, the rather general notion of 'culture' that is implied here, there is also a question of how to recognize 'alternativity' of this more cultural kind. Does it only include occasions when the text contains a complete surprise for the implied 'typical' reader, or might it also include moments when something is unexpected in that particular co-text or text?

However, Cook's argument rests on the dichotomy between schema refreshment and schema reinforcement. Recognizing a schema, albeit one out of place, rather than finding a new or different schema challenges the simplicity of this argument, and muddies the distinction between change (or refreshment) and reinforcement.

Another issue that is directly connected with this argument is that of the familiarity of a literary work to the reader. It is common for readers to read favourite books, and even more often favourite poems, more than once. While this is often associated with 'higher' forms of literature – or perhaps with the traditional canon – it is probably true more widely that people re-read texts they enjoy. The problem it raises for the proposed schema-change function of literature is that it leads us to hypothesize

that it is, indeed, a feature of higher literature, because such texts have a capacity for continuing to change the reader's schema however often they are read.

This leads us to Cook's (1994, 10) argument regarding literary texts. First, he believes that a literary text may perform the important function of breaking down existing schemata (of the reader), recognizing them, and building new ones. Second, he defines actual, individual literary 'experiences' where it is the reader's reaction to the text that counts:

This approach, however, ..., can never assign the quality 'literariness', once and for all, to a given text, but only to a given discourse: to a text, in other words, in interaction with a particular reader. (Ibid, 182)

In addition, Bex (1996: 197) defines the social function of literature as "essentially ludic." He adds:

Some works of literature have a homiletic function in that they invite us to compare the fictional worlds they create with the phenomenal world that we experience in our everyday life. (Ibid, 197-8)

Schema change is more likely to happen when a text has *no other*, more functional role. Thus a type of discourse removed from immediate practical and social functions is best suited to changing schemata. (Cook, 1994: 183) But the schema-changing genres have as their central function precisely the practical one of changing schemata, in immediate social contexts, as well as others of informing and educating the receiver.

It is this concern with the receiver (reader) that makes Cook repeatedly points out that discourse deviation and schema refreshment are reader-dependent phenomena: what is schema refreshing for one reader, or one culture, may not be

schema refreshing for another reader, or another culture. (Semino, 1997: 155) This goes with the prevalent dictum of reader-response approach to literature that different readers produce different readings. Hence, schema theory accounts for variant readings almost by definition: if readers apply different schemata (or different variants of the same schema) to the same text, they will end up with different understandings.

The reading of a text is unlikely to cause any significant degree of schema refreshment, for Cook defines 'schema refreshment' as a change in an individual's schemata that may involve the destruction of existing schemata, the creation of new ones, or the establishment of new connections between existing schemata. (Cook, 1994: 189 ff) Rather, this reading reinforces the validity of existing knowledge structures. (Semino, 1997: 175)

An important and useful question to ask now is whether we should treat the textual qualities of 'schema reinforcement' and 'schema refreshment' as if they were gradable antonyms. On the one hand, it could be argued that texts are, indeed, gradable. One text might have more individual instances of schema refreshment than another (i.e. more different schemata being challenged). Another text might challenge schemata in a more extreme fashion than other texts. Gradation entails that once we have left the extreme of schema reinforcement, we are in schema-refreshment territory.

But antonymy is rather weak. Instead, these terms are more like complementaries than antonyms. Thus if one were to say 'this text is not schema-refreshing,' it would imply the truth of the alternative statement 'this text is not schema-refreshing.' In other words, though one could agree for a scale of (degrees of) refreshment, schema reinforcement itself simply occupies a mutually exclusive position with regard to

schema change. Schema reinforcement becomes, in this new conception, not just quantitatively but also qualitatively different from schema refreshment, and the implications for any text analysis that has a social or political outlook are significant. If there are texts, or aspects of texts, that really do not enter the schema change continuum, but are simply schema-reinforcing, any function *other* than supporting the status quo is in question.

Conclusion

After the announcement of author's death, the burial of the dead paved the way for the celebration of the birth of the reader (receiver) of literary texts. This was caused, partly, by the calls of some critics and the introduction of some important terms like 'the intentional fallacy' and 'the affected fallacy'. This ruling out of the author and his authorial meaning led to the notion that the meaning of a literary text is not wholly intrinsic to the text. As readers proceed through the text, they make choices and engage in interpretive processes that may be traced and analyzed. This interpretive endeavour is directly related to the highly flexible reader's schemata that guide his/her responses to a literary text. Thus, reading in general and reading literature in particular either affirm, reinforce, refresh, or change the reader's schemata, for a literary text has the ability to challenge and modify his/her existing ones.

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خلاصة:

قراءة الأدب: جدل المعرفة

ما قراءة أو تلقي الأدب الا شأننا يخص محاولة القاري (المتلقي) الحثيثة في تأويل نصاً ما بطرق عدة، لذا تعد تجربة القراءة تجربة خاصة جداً وذاتية الى درجة كبيرة، إذ ان من الصعب جداً أن يكون هناك قارئاً مثالياً. اما القارئ الحقيقي فهو ذلك القارئ الذي يمتاز بمرجعياته وسياقه وتوقعاته واستراتيجياته التأويلية الخاصة. لذلك يعد البحث في مجال علو النفس (خصوصاً نظرية المعرفة) والتاريخ الاجتماعي ودراسات الجنس وحقول المعرفة الاخرى يعد بحثاً لا مفر منه.

تحاول الورقة البحثية هذه سبر غور هذا المجال الزلق الذي يتعلق بما يحدث عندما نقرأ نصاً ادبياً معيناً، ما الأحاسيس والرؤى التي تغمرنا عندما نقرأ، ذلك لان الوظيفة العامة للأدب هي تأكيد أو تجديد أو تغيير معرفة القارئ (المتلقي).