PSYCHOLOGICAL REALISM IN THE STUDY OF LITERARY TEXTS

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ABSTRACT

The reading of literary texts is not the same as reading expository texts as they offer different kinds of information to the readers. Expository texts deal mostly with facts. Literary texts, on the other hand, deal with life stories; and being life stories, will also incorporate (among other things) human behavior, different geographical, cultural, and political settings and perhaps a host of other things. If literary texts contain all these information, how can readers be made aware of them? Psychological realism offers that possibility by allowing readers to reconstruct each aspect of information offered in a text through the different "angles" or "perspectives" that they choose to view it. It is a process that allows for the creation and recreation of new texts out of the same text - not marring content but weaving instead a beautiful and colourful tapestry out of these pieces of creation.

Having attended a number of seminars and conferences in Malaysia and abroad, I find that a much needed framework within which we can explain why readers interpret texts the way they do, has to be found. Before that can be done, an understanding of what reading is and what it entails needs to be addressed. Very simply put, reading comes as a result of the presence of a book, a material, or an article that has been written by an author whose aim in writing is to communicate an idea, a message, or a piece of information worth sharing with the reader or the public in general.

Having thus established a simplistic definition of reading, we now move to a different level of what reading is in the context of reading a literary work. But before that, we will look at an axiom: that literature is a form of communication whose communicative goal is implicit. It is implicit because the limits of its interpretation are unforeseenable because each reader will bring to the reading task different background knowledge, different ideas, and different ways of understanding what the writer means. The writer, however, is convinced that he or she will be understood, and that he or she wishes to be understood. We must also understand that communication has a much broader value than "information" because information - by the fact that its aim is to "inform" - is purely factual; it can be translated into symbols (words and ideas) in such a way that nothing will be left over. In other words, the writer of information will make use of words and construct sentences in a manner to ensure that what he or she wishes to "inform" will be understood clearly and that the information cannot be translated into anything other than what he or she wants understood (e.g. if it is the 1990 Microeconomic book, Volume 3 written by Samuel Backett that the information writer wants sent over, then it is precisely that book that must be sent to him or her).

In a written communication the writer and the reader are not co-present. It follows then that the communication is all one way; there is no possibility, as there is in face-to-face conversation, either of the, reader's checking his/her understanding (feedback) or of the writer's adjustment of the communication to accord with the reader's reactions. Thus, in written literary communication, the content is entrusted entirely to the reader's interest in the message. The writer, absent or no longer alive, enjoys at most the possibility of concentrating within his/her message the incentives toward its utilization. Further difficulties arise from the fact that the context to which the writer refers may be unknown to the reader or known only in part. The good writer, however, forsees this fact and will seek to include in his/her message as many references to the context as he/she can. In short, he/she introjects the context into his message.

Add to this is the absence of para-linguistic expression devices such as intonation, gesture, etc. As Martinet (1962) puts it "[m]any of the features that differentiate written style from spoken style can be traced back to a need, in writing, to compensate for the loss of suprasegmental and individual elements of speech" (p.123).

Reader-Response Theories

Having done a cursory explanation of reading and also what an information-based text and a literary-based text is, we now try to establish a theoretical framework to explain why it is possible for different readers to react differently to the same literary texts; and by literary texts I include those subsumed under the small "1" as well as the big "L."

First of all we will look at some of the reader-response theories that have come forth to address the issues associated with the "reconstruction" of literary text. Many reader-response theories have opposing views as to what determines text comprehension; the text itself or the reader? Wayne Booth, for example, a rhetorical reader-response critic, has for most of his career regarded the reader as a function of the text, but his book Critical Understanding, offers a compelling portrait of the effect of reader-oriented theories on a critic who was at one time firmly grounded in text alone. Booth currently argues that the "author.... text …and reader…. join inextricably" in the reading process (1979: 238), and that the text does not contain meaning, but rather, provides only "boundary conditions" of "appropriate response" (214-42). Booth, however, is unable to define these boundary conditions adequately and ultimately suggests that their existence is problematic.

Coming from the other extreme, subjective reader-response criticism, Norman Holland tries to argue that texts are a product of a reader's "identity theme" and that, in themselves, they provide no constraints on interpretation. However, like Booth, Holland cannot successfully sustain his position. At times Holland asserts that the text has status as an object - "only as specks of carbon on dried wood pulp" (1975: 12). But as Booth is unable to demonstrate adequately that boundry conditions exist in the text, so Holland is unable to avoid suggesting that they do not. He states that "all literary interpretations interrelate 'objective features' of a text in a 'subjective' way" (1975: 337), suggesting that not only carbon specks, but 'features' of some kind can be said to exist in the text that constrain interpretation.

Thus we see that two critics, one who tries to locate the source of meaning in the "facts" of the text and one who tries to locate it in the "interpretations" of the reader, are both unable to maintain their positions because they are influenced by the arguments that oppose their own. Neither is able to

develop a vocabulary that can integrate their two positions or that can clearly distinguish the role of the reader from the role of the text.

Other reader-response critics such as Stanley Fish, originally from a phenomenological perspective, and Jonathen Culler, from a structuralist perspective, began their study of the reading process by asserting that the reader and the text interacted to create meaning. In *Literature in the Reader* (1980) for example, Fish proposed that literature should be viewed as "kinetic art" (p.43) that "provokes" (p.27) response. He suggests that "the information an utterance gives (its message), is a constituent of, but certainly not to be identified with, its meaning" (p.32). Such a statement implies that texts can affect readers' assumptions and expectations, but do not have "meaning" until they are experienced by readers and that texts can constrain the determination of meaning without themselves containing meaning. Fish, however, like Booth, found himself unable to explain how the text provokes responses, and eventually he admitted that he could not say what interpretation is "of' (p.165). Currently, Fish has adopted a kind of structuralist stance, arguing that the "formal structures" of texts are simply a product of the interpretive strategies a reader brings to bear on a text and are not in any way a part of "the text, itself' (p.169). Fish suggests that readers "construct" texts, not "construe" them (p.327) according to the interpretive communities to which they belong.

Like Fish, Jonathen Culler began his study of the reading process by assuming that the text has "potential properties", "features" (1981: x; 59), or "empty meanings" (1975:119). These features seem similar to Booth's boundry conditions and to Fish's notion that "strings of words" "provoke" readers' activities. Like Booth and Fish, Culler found it difficult to say exactly what these textual features were. Later, influenced by deconstruction, Culler has altered his position on the status of the text. He now argues that it is impossible to "establish well-grounded distinctions between fact and interpretation, between what can be read in the text and what is read into it" (1982:75).

It is only Wolfgang Iser, the best-known reader-oriented critic, who has continued to argue that meaning occurs in a dynamic interaction between a reader and a text. Iser distinguishes between the "text" (the words on the printed page), and the "aesthetic object" (the imaginative realization of the text by the individual reader), and he argues that the text is a set of instructions for "producing what it itself is not" (1979: ix). While Iser attempts to distinguish between textual structures, such as familiar norms, conventions, blanks, and negations, and the readers' response to these structures, some of his critics, however, have argued that Iser's "structures" are simply a product of his interpretive strategies and do not have an objective existence at all (Kuenzli, 1980: 55-56). Iser's concept of textual structures also needs to be more clearly defined.

By trying to take into account the role of the reader and the role of the social and historical forces in the meaning-making process, reader-oriented critics find themselves unable to account adequately not only for the role of the text, but also unable to rid of themselves of the nagging sense that the text does, in some way, constrain the production of meaning. Culler suggests that "the story of manipulation [of reader by text] will always reassert itself…because it is a much better story, full of dramatic encounters, moments of deception, and reversals of fortune" (1982:72). Reports of the text constraining interpretation keep reasserting themselves not only because they make a good story but also because they are more in keeping with our general assumptions about cognitive processes; that perceivers are influenced in some way by the objects they encounter. As Norman Holland stated in another context, "intellectually it is awkward to suppose that we suddenly reverse our entire cognitive system when we shift from fact to fiction" (Iser, 1980:61).

Psychological Realism

A theory of reader-response that develops from a theory of general cognition might help to account more satisfactorily for the status of both the reader and the text in the reading process. "Psychological realism" is a modern theory of perception whose central concept is that perception occurs in a mutual interaction between reader and text and the environment he or she is in, Developed by James Gibson (1979) in the area of object perception - i.e. ecological realism, psychological realism has been extended by such psychologists as Michael Turvey and Robert Shaw in the area of action, and has recently been applied to language perception by Robert Verbrugge. Because it is an interactive theory of meaning, psychological realism can be usefully extended to address issues of reader-response criticism: it can provide unique metaphors for understanding the interaction of the reader and the text during the reading process.

Reading Turvey, Shaw, or Verbrugge will make most of us shy away from understanding what psychological realism has to offer because of the linguistic and semantic complexity of terms used, and also the background knowledge one must have to fully grasp what they want to say (and which can be said in more simple terms). We will first go back to Gibson on ecological realism and use examples which I think might make comprehension of his ideas and those of the psychological realists easier.

Let us take a simple tree as our example. Grown in a fertile area, this tree will bear leaves in profusion (hoping that it is one of those that is capable of doing it). The same tree in a semi-arid area will look different; in a desert, it might be very small, thin, with very small leaves or the tree itself might be non-existent for that matter. These are "pictures" of the same tree which has been uprooted and replanted in different areas. Look at the tree again; this time in its lush surrounding in the morning, the afternoon, the evening, at dusk, and at night. There will be discernable differences in color for the bark, the stems and the leaves in the different light and times of the day. Again "pictures"of the same tree. Look at the tree while standing, stare at it from below, and from above (being in a helicopter might do the trick but trying to make wings might take too long). Look at the tree from one angle and from different angles; again we see something different of the same tree and yet we are looking at the same tree. The "reality" of the tree depends on where it is growing (in a warm climate, a cold one, or an arid one?), in which light it is discerned, and from which angle we look at it. It is like the three (or is it seven?) blind men with the elephant!

Gibson's concept of "ecological realism" has now been extended to explain certain phenomena occurring in reading and the interpretation of literary work. However, since we are no longer dealing with trees, soil and light but "modes of thinking" and the "mind", then psychology is the affected domain and the term "psychological realism", therefore, seems apt to describe the phenomena involved. We can assume that was the line of thinking taken by psychological realists such as Turvey, Shaw, and Verbrugge; and instead of looking at trees they look at books and from different perspectives based on different issues relevant at the time when text is read and/or analyzed.

Psychological-realism agrees with reader-oriented theories that the meaning of a text can never be pinned down and that, as Derrida puts it, "no context permits saturation" (1979: 81). Psychological realism, therefore, allows for the theoretical possibility of infinite meanings and it recognizes the impossibility of the reader's "mastering" a text, but gives the reader the freedom to establish a single, though partial, interpretation.

Psychological realism also allows readers to interpret texts in different manner depending on what aspects of the text they want to study and from which angle they want to study texts from. It is akin

to looking at the tree; from the side, from below, and from above. What readers get from these different angles are still "facts" obtained from the text and they cannot be said to have invented things which are not there. At the same time, text itself cannot be said to constrain interpretation because how one reader interprets part of the text may be different from how another interprets it as each brings his or her own store of background knowledge to bear in that interpretive act.

What I have tried to do so far is to address some interpreting constraints imposed on the interpretation of literary texts. Many serious studies on text interpretation have been bogged down by these constraints because the framework offered itself had been constraining. It is like a law which is rigid imposed on "facts" which are always changing. Because of that it is illogical; an illogicality that is man-made and therefore can be subject to change.

Teaching Implication

The implication to teachers teaching literature from the Psychological Realists' point of view is worth looking at. The basic tenet that needs to be pointed out here is that interpretation of literary texts cannot be the same amongst readers because each can only focus on a certain aspect of the text at one particular time. Interpretation cannot be the same depending on the issues being looked at. Also, based on the fact that English is not our native tongue, interpretation can be different depending on the linguistic repertoire and relevant background knowledge brought to the text.

As with all readings, the first aspect dealt with by most teachers is comprehension - i.e. a general understanding of the story read. Take for example Mark Twain's *The adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Within this "comprehension" mode, the gist of the story may not differ that drastically as the structure of a story is such that there is (often enough) a "setting", "events", and an "ending". Thus, in The adventures of Huckleberry Finn, the setting is Huck and Tom meeting "King" and "Duke", the "events" are things that happened that lead to the exposure of King and Duke as impostors and cheaters, and the "ending" sees Huck and Tom running away from them.

This is the stage where teachers normally stop. However, the richness of literary texts should not be wasted. Psychological realism has offered us a framework which allows text to be viewed from different angles (perspectives) yet not hold anyone accountable for doing so. Such being the case, it is therefore, plausible to address a literary text not only from its story line per Se, but also from its cultural, class or societal, moral, gender, aesthetic, and/or even psychological issues. By doing this - i.e. to let text undergo the rigors of reiterated reading for different "pictures" of the same text, teachers can make use of a literary source in a holistic manner, exhausting it of' all possible information it can offer to the students. In this way, individual interest can be given attention. Reading becomes more of putting "different chips" together to make text a more beautiful piece of work to look at. At the same time, reading becomes not more regurgitation of' "information" but an active act where the compilation of "facts" derived from text can be used as a springboard for other learning activities to take place.

Application of Psychological Realism when Reading a Literary Text

A few of the "angles" or "perspectives" that can be taken to view a literary text will now be discussed. Prior to using these "angles", the first activity should be reading for an overall

comprehension of the text. When it is established that students have understood the general outline of the story, the following statements (which could be written on any size cards) may be used to focus (and refocus) students' attention to issues that could be found in the text already read.

Moral

    i. Literature is something that teaches me and somehow helps me become a better person. All good literature is basically moral and uplifting. I agree with Tolstoy when he said that literature helps to answer the question "How ought I to live?"

Class

    ii. I read literature in order to understand the class struggle at various times and in various places. I believe that the economic exploitation of the mass of people by a privileged few is responsible for almost all human suffering.

Psychological

    iii. "You never really understand a person until you consider things from his or her point of view.... until you climb into his or her skin and walk around in it" (Atticus Finch). The most important thing in literature for me is the study of character because it enables me to extend my understanding of people and their motivation.

Gender

    iv. The literature I prefer to read explores women's experience of the world. Women are consistently denied recognition or real power even through their contribution to world history has been as important as that of men.

Documentary

    v. I'd rather read a novel by Dickens or Twain, for example, than a history text book to gain an insight into the way people lived at a particular time. I learn so much about other cultures and other ages from literature.

The cards are but some examples of "angles" that students can take to look at a literary text. More "angles" can be found depending on the books chosen for the reading task. These different angles of looking at text are by themselves interesting and valid, and they can offer for a more lively discussion of text and its content. The class, as a unit, can choose what angle it wants to take or teachers can combine two angles that are complementary for discussion purposes later on - e.g. (i) & (ii) or (i) & (iii). Alternatively, groups can choose what they want to see and later share their finding with the class.

"Angles" allow for a more comprehensive look of text. At the same time, they also help to direct readers to take a more critical stance in their approach to understand "issues" couched in that text. To quote Derrida (1979, 81) "...no context permits saturation"; there will always be something different to learn from literary text. Like the tree, literary texts will always be viewed differently depending on the ideo-political, and sociological "climate", the "time" or "period", and sentiment of the readers who read them.

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