The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach

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Abstract

In the present paper a research has been done on the essay 'The The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach' by' Wolfgang Iser'. It has been explained into much simpler language about what the author conveys for better understanding and further references. Also the criticism has been done by various critics from various sources which is helpful from examination point of view. The paper has been divided into five main contexts with an introduction and the conclusions. Also the references have been written that depicts the sources of criticism.

Keywords: Two poles, Gaps, Indeterminacy, Consistency, Identification

1 Introduction

The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach is a theory by Germany literary scholar Wolfgang Iser that began to evolve in 1967while he was working in University of Konstanz. In his approach to reader-response theory, Iser describes the process of first reading, the subsequent development of the text into a 'whole' and how the dialogue between the reader and the text takes places. For Iser, meaning is not an object to be found within the text, but is an event that occurs somewhere between the text and the reader. Specifically, a reader comes to the text, which is a fixed world, but meaning is realised through the act of reading and how a reader connects the structures of the text to their own experience. A literary work, which for Iser is created when reader and a text "converge, consists of two poles": the artistic and the aesthetic. Both of these poles contribute the two central points of Iser's theory: the concept of "implied reader" and narrative "gaps". For Iser, a literary work is composed of both written and unwritten portions of a text.

2 Two Poles

"The phenomenological theory of art lays full stress on the idea that, in considering a literary work, one must take into account not only the actual text but also, and in equal measure, the actions involved in responding to that text"

Here, Iser states that according to phenomenology, when considering a literary work one must examine not only the text but the response it evokes in the reader. This theory is the interaction between the actual text and the reader's imagination. Roman In garden in the context to the text gave four aspects in which the text can be realized, being: structuralism, schematised view, semantics and representity. The literary work has thus two poles, called the artistic pole which refers to the actual text created by the author and the other being aesthetic pole which refers to the realisation which is accomplished by the reader of the text. The literary work cannot be completely identical with the text or its realisation but it lies halfway between the two. Iser says 'text only takes on life when it is read and realised'. He says it is the non-concrete reality of the work that makes it dynamic in nature, and in turn is the requirement which must be satisfied before taking course of action for effects that is foreground in the work. The literary work is more than just a text – something abstract between the text and reader's response to it. The reading causes the literary work to unfold its naturally dynamic character. Text just should be suggestive as in to give some and withhold some. He also says that text must have the potential to engage reader's imagination in the work as reading is only a pleasure when active and creative. The written text imposes certain limits for the unwritten part where reader's imagination takes place but then it should be worked out well to prevent the haziness in the text. Finally it is the end product of the interaction between the text and reader's realisation of the text.

Critic – According to Stanley Fish, Iser's theory of aesthetic response differs from other theories of reader response. Significantly, Iser does not analyse actual reading of texts, but proceeds from an ideal "implied reader". For Iser, reader does not mine out an objective meaning hidden with the text rather literature generates

effects of meaning for reader in a virtual space created between the reader and the text. Such a theory of aesthetic response denies the simple dichotomy of fiction and reality. According to Iser, fiction proposes alternate worlds created within the virtual reality of the text's meaning. In other words, in literature the actual and the possible can exist simultaneously. Literature thus takes on a greater human function of imagining beyond the given constraints of experience for example, in political sphere, Iser's theory of reading might commend a critical democratic politics that urges constant re-examination of social and individual conventions by 'deforming' and defamiliarising the accepted perspectives.

3 Gaps

"One text is potentially capable of several different realisations, and no reading can ever exhaust the full potential, for each individual reader will fill in the gaps in his own way, thereby excluding the various other possibilities; as he reads, he will make his own decision as to how the gap is to be filled"

In this Iser states that every individual reader has its own different realisations and no one or for that fact even hundreds of readers can ever exhaust the work's full potential as the one text itself has the full potential that is capable of various varied realisations. The text give some and withhold some to keep the imagination of the reader alive. It leaves some gaps for the imagination which later relies on the reader of how to realise the text and fill those gaps in their own creative way. While the reader fill the gaps the reader must exclude the other possibilities of text s he will make his own decision of how to fill those gaps by his or her own realisation of the text. Each and every sentence should be important in the text, where one leads to the other so as to resist the breakdown of the flow of the text. The originally constructive process is inspired by pre-intentions of what is to come next that brings it to the fruitition for which reader's imagination is required that gives the shape to the interaction in structure by the sequence of the sentences. He states the fact that completely different readers can be differently affected by the 'reality' of a particular text is an evidence into which reading is in the form of creative process which is far more than the mere perception. The virtual dimension is the coming together of the text and the imagination. The activity of reading is characterised as Kaleidoscope of perspectives, pre-intentions and recollections. He also says that it is through inevitable omissions that text gain its dynamism. In the act of the gaps to be filled in the text the dynamics of reading are revealed. The reading process is selective and the potential text is richer than any of its individual realisations. Iser also says that it is a common

experience that when the reader reads he text for the second time he or she notices different things which he or she has missed the first time but it refers to the perception totally different angle through which he or she reads the text for second time. The 'reality' of the reading experience can illuminate basic patterns of real experience.

Critic – Iser's theory of two poles in which the artistic pole is the text itself and the aesthetic pole is reader's revelation of meaning. This approach differs from that of Roland Barthes. Iser separate the reader and the text stating that they are not connected. There are a certain problematic paradoxes when reading his works. The crux of Iser's argument states that reading is by no means a passive process. While he makes apparent that connection does exist, he does not explain or investigate to what extent the blank can control a reader (Duckworth, 339). According to Iser, situations and conventions determine the way by which the gaps are filled. This seems problematic when applying it to a story that is not of a conventional nature.

4 Indeterminacy

"With a literary text we can only picture things which are not there; the written part of the text gives us the knowledge, but it is the unwritten part that gives us the opportunity to picture things; indeed without the elements of indeterminacy, the gaps in the text, we should not be able to use our imagination"

The author sets the guidelines for the reader but the reader fill in the blanks or gaps with his or her own imagination. In this Iser states that one can only imagine the things that are not there. He says that the written part in text gives the reader the knowledge but it is the unwritten part that give them the opportunity to use his or her imagination as per his or her own immense pleasure in the reading of the text. He says that without this element of indeterminacy, the gaps left in the text the reader is not completely free to use his or her imagination in the realisation of the text that one comes across. The reader has then the complete freedom when where he imagines a set of possibilities as opposed to one and only particular thing. A literary work thus consists of the actual text and then of the text which is not there that enlists the reader's imagination of the text for example, while reading the novel 'The Notebook' by 'Nicholas Sparks' they may have the conception of the scenario but when have watched its movie, some may say that 'that's not what i imagined it to be'. The point is that this proves the reader has vast possibilities of his imaginative senses but the moment these possibilities are narrowed down the imagination is put out of action.

Critic – Rosenblatt with her famous essay 'Towards a Transactional Theory of Reading' (1969) which is cited adding greatly to the discussion in Literature Criticism

questioning the manner in which one literary work is interpreted differently from one reader to the other. This helped spark the argument of whether the reader presupposes the literary work or whether the literary work presupposes the reader. Rosenblatt holds there may be in addition a mode from "efferent" information seeking only. The problem is the origination of meaning: does it originate with the author or the reader-responder. The expands to the questions of what the act of reading really is and what the relationship of reader to succession of world really is.

5 Consistency

"By grouping together the written parts of the text, we enable them to interact, we observe the direction in which they are leading us, and we project onto them the consistency which we, as reader require"

In this Iser says that or talk about the process of anticipation and retrospection in which all the different aspects of a text are grouped together to form the consistency for the reader. The gestalt – one organised whole is coloured by our own characteristic selection process. He says it is not the text that gives us rather it takes place between the written text and the mind of the reader with his or her own experience, consciousness, and the outlook. The 'gestalt' is not the true meaning of the text, but it is at best the form meaning. The reader seeks the unity in the text. The reader must reconcile all the possibilities to get a clear unified whole sense of the text. A text offers much potential. The reader compares different parts of the texts to achieve this consistency. He does this through the illusions that the text creates. Here too there is modification of the illusion, and throughout reading the "gestalt" changes otherwise the reader loses interest. The poly semantic nature – branch of knowledge that interprets multiple meaning, of the text and the illusion-making of reader are opposed to each other. The configurative meaning is always accompanied by 'alien associations' that do not fit within the illusion formed by the reader. He also states that "illusion wears off once the expectation is stepped up; we take it for granted and want more". He says that once the reader is entangled, his preconceptions re overtaken and then the text becomes his 'present' and his ideas fades away in the 'past' and the moment this happens the reader is free to the immediate experience of the text, which was not possible till his own preconceptions were his present and existed.

Critic – Reader-response critics see the reading both as a subjective and objective act. Reader-response theory can be divided into three different groups. Critics forming the first group also known as individualists, claim that the text and the reader always co-exist. Stanley Fish is considered as most prominent individualist. The second group is known as

experimenters which includes David Miall, Richard Graigg. Uniformists are the third group, lead by German literary scholar Iser, they state that text informs and limits. In this theory, the reader's response is based on the text. Reader-response criticism is related to psychology. Since reader-response criticism has something to do with psychological principles, it can also be applied to other arts such as cinema, music or painting. Reader-response criticism also recognises that text's interpretations will often depend on time or occasion when work is read. At different points in reader's life, they may take different meaning from the text, often depending on their own life experiences.

6 Identification

"In the act of reading, having to think something that we have not yet experienced does not mean only being in a position to conceive or even understand it; it also means that such acts of conception are possible and successful to the degree that they lead to something being formulated in us"

Here, Iser states that the reader needs three aspects in order to require a relationship with the text: anticipation and retrospection, text as living event and life-likeness. The reader absorbs what is unfamiliar in the text through the process of identification. The literary work induces the change in the reader. A literary text is effective when it creates expectations rooted in familiarity and negates them in the txt, creating for reader something unfamiliar. The reader is then forced to modify his preconception to keep up with the illusion that is created by the text. There is a difference of opinion between the writer and the reader which is blurred while reading the text, as when the reader reads he takes someone else's ideas and gets himself immersed in it. The reader gets lost in the text so much that he loses his own sense of self and become someone that he or she is not. 'George Bernard Shaw' says that 'You have learnt something. That always feels at first as if you had lost something'. Iser expounds – the reader lost the inability to do that thing or any change that causes pangs of nostalgia. It implies relearning. There is personality of the reader that is immersed in the story or the text, subjected to author's thoughts and also there is previously existing self. Iser in this refers to the process of absorbing the unfamiliar by the reader of what he reads and how as the process of identification. Here, identification is termed as nothing more than a mere description of the text. In reading the reader becomes the subject that does the thinking. The reader thinks as in being in his own mental world but then at the same time it feels the thoughts are from another world as if he does not exist, to the reader the thought seems alien. Thus in reading there are two levels – 'the alien me' and 'the real, virtual me' which are not completely cut off

from each other. The relationship between virtual background and alien theme is what make the unfamiliar to be familiar and possible to understand.

7 Conclusion

The text 'the reading process: a phenomenological approach' by 'Wolfgang Iser' is wholly and solely about the realisation of the text by the reader. It is basically the reader's response theory of the text. Iser talks about the text and what it does to the reader in regard to artistic and aesthetic pole, the gaps that are filled by the reader by his own imagination, the opportunity of reader's imagination by indeterminacy, the alien and virtual understanding of the text by the process of identification and lastly about the preconceptions of the reader regarding the text. Iser states that the theory about the relationship between the text and the reader. The crux of the theory lies in where the reader realises what he thinks is actually what he does not at the same time in his mental world as being the thoughts from the other mental world. As Iser says being a reader 'Whatever I read, I mentally pronounce an I, and yet the I which I pronounce is not myself.

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