The power of a reader: From the perspectives of Norman Holland and Wolfgang Iser

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Abstract

This paper explores the reader-oriented approaches to literary theory through the perspectives of Norman Holland and Wolfgang Iser, focusing on their theories of reader-text interaction. Holland, drawing from psychoanalytic theory, emphasizes the role of the reader's unconscious mind and psychological experiences in shaping the reading process. Through his transactive theory, he argues that readers project their identity issues onto the text, influencing their interpretations. Iser, on the other hand, adopts a phenomenological approach, highlighting the reader's active engagement with the text and the interplay between their expectations and the text's structures. His concepts, such as the implied reader and the wandering viewpoint, underscore the dynamic nature of meaning-making during reading. Despite their differences, both theorists challenge text-oriented approaches, emphasizing the vital role of the reader in creating meaning. This comparative analysis aims at enriching the understanding of reader-oriented literary theory and underscores the complexity of reader-text interaction in the process of interpretation.

1 Introduction

There are few more exciting paths taken by recent literary theory than the one moving toward a novel way of comprehending readers' vantage point for literary texts. Reader-oriented approaches to narrative texts assume that all texts gain meaning by means of an interaction between text and reader. While all theorists pose similar questions regarding the reading process, each approaches the analysis of a specific text differently. Some of them concentrate on the reader's reading process, while others focus on the text in parallel with its effect on the reader and how a reader responds to it. In addition, some center on the author's attitudes towards the reader and the purpose of a text. Norman Holland, who places emphasis on a psychological approach to the reading activity, and Wolfgang Iser, who focuses on the reader's own contribution to the meaning of a text, are among the theorists investigating the dynamic relationship between text and reader.

Reader-oriented theories and interest in the reading process per se emerged during the 1970s as

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a reaction against a developing tendency to ignore the role of a reader in the process of creating meaning, which was the primary principle of the overly text-oriented theories of New Criticism and Formalism, dominant in the literary theory and criticism in the 1940s and 1950s. The New Critics believed the meaning of a text is contained in the text alone, contrary to reader-response theorists who share two beliefs: "(1) that the role of the reader cannot be omitted from our understanding of literature and (2) that the readers do not passively consume the meaning presented to them by an objective literary text; rather they actively forge the meaning they uncover in literature" (Tyson, 2015, p. 170). On the other hand, not the reader but the text was the only source of meaning for New Critics who believed that the readers were passive and could not implement personal experiences or emotions in the analysis of the texts. Nonetheless, the text could have many effects on the reader. According to Charles Bressler, "The New Critics believed the text would reveal its own meaning. Extrinsic factors, such as historical or social context, mattered somewhat, but the key to a text's interpretation was the actual text the reader hand in hand" (2011, p. 70). Thus, the emergence of reader-oriented theories during the 1970s marked a significant departure from the text-oriented approaches of New Criticism and Formalism, highlighting the vital role of the reader in the process of generating meaning and challenging the notion of the text as the sole source of meaning. In this context, the aim of this paper is to discuss Holland and Iser's approaches to the reader and text interaction with the help of their works "The Miller's Wife and the Professors: Questions about the Transactive Theory of Reading" (2003) and *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* respectively (1997).

2 Exploring Norman Holland's psychoanalytical approach to literary theory and reading

Reader-response theory and psychoanalytic theory overlap in many ways related to their interest in the psychological experience of a reader. In a similar vein, Norman Holland has explored how the human mind relates to literature throughout his career. He has been teaching and writing about psychoanalytical psychology, cognitive science, and their respective claims regarding readers' responses to literary texts, movies, and other branches of art. Since Norman Holland deals with "constructing a post-Freudian psychoaesthetics", understanding the key concepts of the psychoanalytic theory is crucial in order to internalize his assertions (Freund, 2013, p. 30). When viewed through a psychoanalytic lens, one notices that the world is composed of individuals "with a psychological history that begins in childhood experiences in the family and each with patterns of adolescent and adult behavior that are the direct result of that early experience" (Tyson, 2015, p. 12). One of the main concepts of psychoanalytic thinking is the 'unconscious' which is the store of hurtful experiences and emotions of individuals; that is, injuries, fears, desires, and conflicts wanted to be covered up. As stated by Lois Tyson, "[t]he unconscious is a dynamic entity that engages us at the deepest level of our being" (Tyson, 2015, p. 12). Therefore, exploring and understanding the depths of the unconscious can lead to profound insights into us and our relationships with the world around us.

Another area of psychological experience is human sexuality. According to Sigmund Freud, sexuality constitutes a significant aspect of our identity, and even infants are regarded as sexual beings who pass through oral, anal, and genital stages in which pleasure is centered on different parts of the body. Psychoanalytic theorists find close connections between our sexuality and identity. For this reason, sexuality indicates the general psychological state in the most accurate and unfailing way. However, sexual behavior is also a product of society and culture, determining

what is considered right or wrong in terms of sexual rules and conduct, thereby bringing forth the concept of the superego. According to the theory, society's doctrines and values form our superego, which is in direct opposition to the id, forming "[t]he irrational, instinctual, unknown, and unconscious part of the psyche. …Containing our secret desires, our darkest wishes, and our most intense fears, the id wishes only to fulfill the urges of the pleasure principle" (Bressler, 2011, p. 127). On the other hand, the ego plays the role of referee between the id and the superego.

Holland stresses the importance of the conscious personality and unconscious psyche of the reader in a reading activity. According to him, meaning is primarily psychological, and there is a mutual affinity between psychic and textual processes. As Jeremy Lane stated in *Modern North American Criticism and Theory*, Holland's starting point is:

> Freudian sanctioning of artistic creativity as the therapeutic license to fantasy which, although grounded in the infantile ego and its unconscious drives, succeeds in transforming these (expressed as either desire or fear) into socially respectable and representable imaginative form and thereby achieves an adult mediation between fantasizing ego and obdurate reality. (2006, p. 35)

Holland develops a theory that clarifies the secondary process involved in acknowledging this creatively mediating activity. According to him, this perspective entails the particular interplay between the reader as ego and the text as object. It encompasses understanding the act of reading as an interactive and reciprocal exchange between the text's artistic form and significance and the reader's flexible and protective ego (Lane, 2006, p. 35). Holland, who is a psychoanalytical critic, asserts that the desires and beliefs of readers strongly affect how they read. He calls his method *transactive* analysis since he believes that the act of reading involves the transaction between the reader and the text. According to Holland, the interpretation of a reader reveals more about herself or himself than a text. In his article "The Miller's Wife and the Professors: Questions about the Transactive Theory of Reading," Holland analyses six professors' answers given to five questions about the poem titled "The Mill" by Edwin Arlington Robinson. Even though Holland believes that there are common elements in the activity of reading, "we can represent someone's reading a poem or a story as a personal transaction – as an expression of character or identity. … we can understand someone's reading as a function of personal identity" (Holland, 2003, p. 156). The questions start with the most objective and finish with the most subjective one. In other words, they follow a sequence leading from the objective to the subjective.

Holland initially looks at the answers of professors to one single question and notices that, except for the first question, which has right and wrong answers, their responses go in utterly different directions. Then he changes his attitude and looks at the answers of a person to all five questions. Although he works with professional readers comprising American university teachers of literature, "although most are drawing on an essentially similar 'New Critical' training, their answers vary all over the place" (Holland, 2003, p. 160). According to Holland, an evaluation based on the answers to questions one and two could lead to the conclusion that the professors were reading the same text, but it can be inferred that the text was constraining or limiting their responses. However, when the answers given to questions three, four, and five are examined, it can be concluded that the same text was being read in different manners: "Some were concerned with realism, some with logic, some with language, some with literary form. Some were concerned with fear, others with loss, and others with deprivation" (Holland, 2003, p. 160). These varied interpretations underscore the richness and complexity of the text, reflecting the diverse perspectives and concerns of its readers.

While analyzing a literary text or a person, interpretation activity takes place within the scope of the interpreter's identity theme. According to Tyson, Holland's definition of interpretation consists of three stages: defense mode, fantasy mode, and transformation mode. First, in the defense mode, the reader's psychological defenses are enhanced by the text. Second, in the fantasy mode, the reader "find[s] a way to interpret the text that will tranquilize those defenses and thus fulfill our desire to be protected from threats to our psychological equilibrium" (Tyson, 2015, p. 184). Third, in the transformation mode, the readers concentrate on the intellectual interpretation of the text to avoid their own emotional response to it. However, the readers overlook the fact that their intellectual interpretation emerges from their emotional responses.

According to transactive theory, "reading is a creative process in which (one might say) subjectivity questions objectivity, thereby enabling objectivity to respond to and shape subjectivity" (Holland, 2003, p. 164). For this reason, Holland's theory has also been criticized for treating the text as secondary to the personality of the reader, "making the reader a quasi-confessional or autobiographical procedure – the reader ultimately finds only his or her own subjectivity at the core of the text" (Lane, 2006, p. 35). In brief, the debate surrounding transactive theory underscores the complex interplay between reader subjectivity and textual objectivity in the process of reading, raising questions about the relative importance of the reader's personal perspective versus the inherent qualities of the text itself.

3 Wolfgang Iser's phenomenological approach to reader-text interaction and meaning-making

Wolfgang Iser is another advocate of text-reader interaction and the readers' relationship with the text to create and generate meaning. He worked as a professor in many European and American universities – the University of Constance and the University of California, Irvine. His profession was English and Comparative Literature. He became one of the world's most recognized literary theorists of the twentieth century as a result of his significant contributions to reader-response theory. Iser centered upon the contribution of the reader to the meaning of a text. According to Ralf Schneider, Iser:

> made an attempt to account both for the mental activities responsible for the construction of meaning and for the constraints on meaning production pre-structured by the text. Reading a narrative is seen as a dynamic set of mental processes in which past information is continually related to current understanding and hypotheses about future information and in which gaps left by the text are filled so that its indeterminacy is removed. (2010, p. 485)

In *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*, "Iser distinguishes his concern with the theory of 'aesthetic response,' as having 'its roots in the text,' from theories of 'aesthetic reception,'" and consistently observes the diverse methods by which texts encourage, and to some extent direct the imaginative process of readers in comprehending them (Beardsley, 1979, pp. 642-3). It is a phenomenological study that stresses the role of perceivers and their perception of the text. Contrary to the works of the New Critics, who reject the criticisms regarding the literary texts as an object including hidden meaning and motivate readers to arrive at an objective reading of a text using only the text itself, Iser's work discloses that the aim of the critic is not to "explain a work, but to reveal the conditions that bring about its various possible effects" (Iser, 1997, p. 15). Instead of focusing solely on the text itself, Iser argues that the reader's background, experiences, and expectations play a crucial role in shaping the meaning of a literary work. In this view, the critic's task is not to provide a definitive interpretation but rather to explore the different ways in which a text can be understood based on the reader's engagement with it.

Iser introduced two kinds of readers: the implied reader and the real reader. Probably one of the most commonly used constructs in reader-oriented criticism is the 'implied reader' who "embodies all those predispositions necessary for a literary work to exercise its effect—predispositions laid down not by an empirical external reality but by the text itself" (p. 25). As a result, the notion of the implied reader is deeply rooted within the text's structure; it is a construct entirely separate from any actual reader and should not be equated with real individuals. According to Iser, the implied reader represents a complex web of structures within the text that prompt reader engagement. Regardless of the reader's identity or background, they are consistently presented with a specific role to undertake, forming the essence of the implied reader concept. In other words, the implied reader becomes a connection between the real reader and the text. Moreover, Iser suggests two interrelated faces of the implied reader: "the reader's role as a textual structure, and the reader's role as a structured act" (p. 25). The second kind of reader is an actual reader who gets the text physically and reads it in contrast to the implied reader who picks up the text equipped with certain personal fears, needs, desires, oppositions, and prejudices, that is, particular personal and cultural norms.

For Iser, each literary text somehow represents the view of the world gathered by the writer. The work is not just a replica of the given world. It is the construction of this world that shapes the author's intended perspective. Given that the textual world is likely to contain varying levels of unfamiliarity for its potential readers, they must be positioned to embrace this fresh perspective. Also, structured act refers to his idea that "the reader's role is prestructured by three basic components: the different perspectives represented in the text, the vantage point from which he joins them together, and the meeting place where they converge" (p. 25). In other words, the concept of the structured act encapsulates the dynamic interplay between the perspectives within the text, the reader's viewpoint, and the convergence of these elements, fundamentally shaping the reader's role in engaging with the text.

The distinctive characteristic of literature is that it deals with conventions in a different way. Literature shows the reader something about reality by dictating its traditions and, therefore, becomes the object of the readers' reflections. According to Iser, these conventions are the repertoire of the text. It is a "familiar territory" where reader and text come together to initiate communication. As Iser clarified: "The repertoire consists of all the familiar territory within the text. This may be in the form of references to earlier works, or to social and historical norms, or to the whole culture from which the text has emerged" (p. 46). Through the repertoire, the literary text not only reorganizes social and cultural rules but also organizes literary conventions, and in this way, readers might re-evaluate their functions in real life.

A contemporary philosophical tendency focusing on the reader's primary role in determining what to mean is called 'phenomenology.' Of the main importance for Iser's phenomenology is the concept of the wandering viewpoint, which "is a mean of describing the way in which the reader is present in the text. This presence is at a point where memory and expectation converge, and the resultant dialectic movement brings about a continual modification of memory and an increasing complexity of expectation" (p. 79). The reader's experience of reading a book is an ongoing process of adjustment. The readers are equipped with some expectations depending upon their experiences or characters; however, these expectations undergo continuous modification, and the memories are transformed when readers travel through the whole text. What the reader gets while reading a text is not something determined but just a set of perpetually changing views. Iser clarifies his phenomenological view of reading that:

> I have tried to establish my idealized model of text processing along phenomenological lines. I have done so mainly for two reasons: (1) A phenomenological description allows us to focus on processes of constitution that occur not only in reading but also in our basic relations to the world in general. (2) An idealized model that allows description of constitutive processes bears within itself a hermeneutic implication. Idealization entails abstraction. And abstraction, in turn, requires modification through empirical findings. Thus, there is two-way traffic between an idealized model and the data which is meant to assess, so that certain data must inevitably call for differentiation of the model. (Iser, 1997, p. 62).

Iser's approach to establishing an idealized model of text processing aligns with a phenomenological framework, emphasizing the active role of the reader in constituting meaning. By grounding his model in phenomenology, he aims to capture not only the processes involved in reading but also their broader implications for our understanding of the world. The idealized nature of the model allows for abstraction, enabling a focus on the fundamental constitutive processes underlying textual interpretation. However, Iser acknowledges the need for continual refinement based on empirical data, highlighting the dynamic interaction between theoretical constructs and real-world observations. This iterative process ensures that the model remains responsive to new insights and evolving understanding, reflecting a commitment to the ongoing development of interpretive frameworks in literary studies.

4 Comparing Holland's psychoanalytical and Iser's phenomenological view

The claims of Iser and Holland differ on some points. Holland's empirical studies of reader responses seem to be in sharp contrast to Iser's abstract theory. On the one hand, Holland bases his literary theory on the psychoanalytical views of readers, whereas on the other, Iser bases his theory on the phenomenological view of reading. Holland asserts that readers project onto the text they read in accordance with their identity themes/identity issues, to a great extent recreating that text in the reader's image. This theory can be claimed even when readers are literature professors, as Holland displays in "The Miller's Wife and the Professors: Questions about the Transactive Theory of Reading." Holland's argument naturally leads to questions regarding the importance placed on 'subjective' and 'objective' information, the potential for 'misreadings,' and the necessity to acknowledge a reader's evolving interpretations. Holland addresses these questions as he introduces his own 'transactive' theory of reading and establishes his position by citing several other reader-response critics (Keesey, 2003, p. 155). In exploring these questions, Holland's 'transactive' theory of reading emerges as a crucial framework, illuminating the dynamic relationship between readers and texts and revealing the intricate process of interpretation and the flexibility of meaning.

Another point where the two critics do not overlap relates to their contrasts concerning the concepts of the actual reader and the implied reader. Holland carries out his studies with actual readers in his works as *Poems in Persons* (1973) and *5 Readers Reading* (1975), and he himself is the test case in *The Dynamic of Literary Response* (1968, 1975). He collects the various responses of readers and interprets them with regard to the identities of different readers. As stated by Tyson, "Some critics have objected to the using of psychoanalysis to understand the behavior of literary characters because literary characters are not real people and, therefore, do not have psyches that can be analyzed" (2015, p. 35). As a critic basing his literary theory on a psychoanalytic view of readers, Holland aligns parallel with this argument. Holland states in the written interview between Iser and him that:

> One can only arrive at a theory of response by induction from actual responses. While that may be difficult for past eras, we have readers aplenty in our own day who are quite willing to tell us (at length!) about a given literary experience. We can actually analyse what they say instead of relying on inference from a text. To insist on the latter seems to me like trying to decide whether the sun is shining by pulling down the shades and consulting an almanac. (Iser, Holland, & Booth, 1980, p. 58)

However, there is no reference to an actual reader veritably reading in *The Act of Reading*. 'We' and 'the reader' represent his own reading. Iser accepts Holland's argument as the basic difference between their approaches. According to Iser, his aim is "to construct a heuristic model of the activities basic to text-processing." He clarifies that he has constructed this model "not for its own sake, but in order to provide a *framework* which would permit assessment and evaluation of actual readers' responses to a literary text" (Iser, Holland, & Booth, 1980, p. 61). In his pursuit to construct a heuristic model for text-processing activities, Iser emphasizes the importance of providing a framework that enables the evaluation and assessment of real readers' responses to literary texts, distinguishing his approach from Holland's by highlighting the absence of direct engagement with the actual act of reading.

Although the title of Iser's book is *The Act of Reading*, in practice, he limits his model to fiction, while Holland uses other kinds of genres in his investigations, such as plays and poems. For Holland, Iser's reliance on "the four perspectives of narrator, characters, plot, and the fictitious reader and [his] discussions of blanks and negation seem to confine [his] theory intrinsically to a more or less realistic fiction, more if Fielding, less if Beckett, but mimetic always" (Iser, Holland, & Booth, 1980, p. 60). Iser explains the reason for the fact that he uses mainly fiction to illustrate his argument with these words: "I have done so because narrative texts provide the greatest variety of facets pertinent to an analysis of the act of reading" (p. 65). Iser's explanation highlights the richness and complexity of narrative texts in facilitating an analysis of the act of reading. By utilizing fiction, which encompasses diverse perspectives, characters, plots, and themes, he can explore a wide range of perspectives relevant to understanding how readers engage with and interpret texts. Fictional narratives offer a multiplicity of layers and dimensions that can shed light on various facets of the reading process, making them valuable tools for his argument.

4 Conclusion

Norman Holland's psychoanalytic approach and Wolfgang Iser's phenomenological view of reader-text interaction illuminate the diverse perspectives within reader-oriented literary theory. While both theorists acknowledge the dynamic relationship between readers and texts, they diverge significantly in their theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches. Holland's psychoanalytic approach emphasizes the importance of the reader's unconscious mind and psychological experiences in the process of reading. Through his transactive theory, Holland argues that readers project their identity themes or identity issues onto the text, thereby recreating it in their own image. His empirical studies of reader responses, exemplified in works like "The Miller's Wife and the Professors," underscore the subjective nature of interpretation and the role of the reader's evolving interpretations in shaping meaning. In contrast, Iser's phenomenological approach focuses on the reader's contribution to the meaning of a text and the interplay between the reader's expectations and the text's structures. By introducing concepts such as the implied reader and the wandering viewpoint, Iser highlights the reader's active engagement with the text and the continual modification of meaning that unfolds through the reading process. His emphasis on the text's repertoire and the reader's structured act underscores the complexity of reader-text

interaction and the role of literary conventions in determining meaning.

Despite their differences, both theorists challenge the text-oriented approaches of the New Criticism and Formalism, highlighting the vital role of the reader in the process of creating meaning. The theories of Holland and Iser indicate that texts and writers do not constitute the world of literature alone. The text becomes a mirror that reflects the reader's experiences and memories. Ultimately, the comparative analysis of Holland's and Iser's approaches enriches our understanding of reader-oriented literary theory and underscores the complexity of reader-text interaction in the process of creating meaning. By exploring the diverse perspectives within reader-oriented criticism, scholars can gain valuable insights into the dynamic relationship between readers and texts and the multifaceted nature of interpretation in literary studies.

4.1 Limitations and future directions

The paper primarily focuses on the reader-oriented approaches of Norman Holland and Wolfgang Iser, with a particular emphasis on their psychoanalytical and phenomenological perspectives, respectively. However, it does not extensively explore other prominent reader-response theorists, which could provide additional insights into the complexities of reader-text interaction.

Future research could further explore the similarities and differences between reader-oriented approaches within literary theory beyond the perspectives of Holland and Iser. Comparative analyses of diverse theoretical frameworks could enrich the understanding of reader-text interaction and contribute to the development of more comprehensive models of literary interpretation.

5 Statement of researchers

5.1 Researchers contribution rate statement:

The author contributed to the study, approved the final version for publication, and takes responsibility for its accuracy and integrity.

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