

Interdisciplinary Character of Contemporary Literary Theory and Poststructuralist Understanding of Literary Text and Literary Meaning

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Abstract

The present article aims to introduce major convictions of poststructuralism about literary text and literary meaning; to discuss the theoretical complications that arise from poststructuralist beliefs; to show the necessity of including into the interdisciplinary field of research pragmatics and analytical aesthetics; and to argue in defence for alternative conception of text and textual meaning – recently introduced by a Swedish scholar, Anders Pettersson

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Introduction

The present article aims to introduce major convictions of poststructuralism about literary text and literary meaning and discuss both the findings and contradictions of poststructuralist theories. It claims that pragmatics and analytical aesthetics should be included into the interdisciplinary field of research and argues in defence for alternative conception of text and textual meaning – recently introduced by a Swedish scholar, Anders Pettersson.

The fact that contemporary literary theory increasingly acquires interdisciplinary character is anything but new. Since literature utilizes language as its medium and literary text springs from the same origin as any other text, the problems connected with language use in literature and studying the problem of literary communication in the light of verbal communication have been brought to the fore. Accordingly, the study of literary work as a type of text and as a work of art, and of literary meaning, as the crucial aspect of a literary text and literary communication, naturally brings about the need of a wider scope of research than it can be offered solely by literary theory. The convergence of interests of many humanitarian and social sciences in these research areas result into their interdisciplinary collaboration with literary studies.

Literary theory, itself, has many radically opposing views about the nature of literary text and literary meaning. Despite the essential differences between them, the focus on language use in literature and the urgent need for “the application of linguistics” was equally

strong in new critical, formalist, structuralist and poststructuralist schools

of literary criticism. The emphasis given on culture in post-structuralist theories laid the foundation for applying cultural studies in analyzing all cultural practices, including literature. And the concept of literary meaning has been analyzed by different schools of literary criticism with many conflicting views. I find it impossible to discuss each: for one reason, I lack the space in the scope of an article; and, for the other, when speaking about the contemporary literary theory of text and textual meaning, the focus is usually laid on literary post-structuralism (this, of course, does not mean to belittle the interesting contributions of the rest of literary criticism). Anders Pettersson so rightly notes that contemporary literary theory has “markedly poststructuralist background” (Pettersson, 2017, p. 5) - “I will call the standard contemporary literary theory of text and textual meaning “poststructuralist” (ibid., p. 134). Since poststructuralism largely inherited its theoretical foundations from structuralism, certain premises of the latter directly related with poststructuralist convictions, naturally, will be discussed in the article. However, of course, the focus throughout the article rests on poststructuralist view about the problems in question.

Poststructuralist Standpoint about Literary Text and Literary Meaning

Poststructuralism turned out to be both as a direct outcome of structuralism and as a rebellious reaction against it. Although Saussure himself never used the term

“structuralism”, the appearance of his theory of signs hailed the emergence of structural paradigm in linguistics and provided the foundation both for contemporary linguistics and semiotics. In Saussure’s model, signs are constituted by

signifier and signified. The signifier in itself is meaningless unless it is related to the signified, though they are not inherently fixed to each other, and, therefore, their arrangement is arbitrary, which makes it possible for a signifier to signify different things at different points in historical time, suggesting that meaning is a social convention. Signs have no direct reference to reality outside and meanings are not generated through the relationship of signs with what they refer, i.e. through their relationship to outer reality. Accordingly, they generate meanings not through the natural connection with the object world, but by virtue of their difference from other signs. Thus, the “substantialist” view of language, according to which words refer to things in the real world, was abandoned and replaced by a relational one. Saussure presents a dichotomy of language: *langue* – the abstract language system (the network of signs) and *parole* - the concrete use of language (*langue*) in speech. The distinction between *langue* and *parole* turned out to be of paramount importance to the development of linguistics in general. Language, in Saussure’s theory, is presented as an autonomous system which makes no relation to the object world and it is defined purely in terms of its internal relation. As an autonomous system, according to Saussure, language can be compared to chess – “in the case of chess, it is relatively easy to distinguish between what is external and what is internal. The fact that chess came from Persia to Europe is an external fact, whereas everything which concerns the system and its rules is internal (Saussure, 1992, p. 24). His analogy between chess and language autonomous structures clearly demonstrates that as figures move in the game of chess according to internal rules of the game and have nothing to do with outer reality, so the nature of language (*langue*) determines each manifestation of *parole*, i.e. its use in a concrete utterance. Accordingly,

structuralist linguistics was concerned with the theory of underlying system – *la langue*, not with its use in speech. The understanding of “structure” stems from this dichotomy, it refers to the system - overall structure of language - *la langue* out of which *parole* (speech) derives. Therefore, from structuralist perspective, meanings are generated through the rules and conventions that govern the language (*la langue*), rather than *parole*.

Saussure’s theory had an immeasurable impact on literary studies (as on many other fields of sciences). Roland Barthes stated that structuralism founded “a science of literature, or, to be more exact, linguistics of discourse whose object is the “language” of literary forms grasped at many levels” (Barthes, 1967, p. 897). According to him, “structuralism emerged from linguistics and in literature it finds an object which itself emerged from language” (ibid.). Since “literary work offers structuralism the picture of a structure homological with that of language” (ibid., p. 897), linguistics appears to be the very science, which “provides an algorithm for exhaustive and unbiased description of a text” (Culler, 1976, p. 57), and, “that this algorithm of linguistic description constitutes a discovery procedure for poetic patterns” (ibid.). Thus, structuralism suggested that structural patterns found in language existed in other cultural systems and analytical tools of linguistics proved to be useful for analyzing literature, and, that literary system, like language system, signifies according to certain conventions. This belief naturally triggered a question: “Is the individual literary work like a language or is literature as a whole like a language?” (Ibid., p. 96). The answer, J. Culler provides to his question, is a typical one in structuralism and post-structuralism: “In the first case the analogy rests on the fact that a number of linguistic concepts can be applied by extension or in a metaphorical way to literary works: one can

speak of the work as a system, whose elements are defined by their relations to one another, of syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations, of the sequence whose functions in the work correspond to those of nouns, verbs and adjectives in the sentence. In the second case, the analogy is stronger and more interesting: since literature itself is a system of signs and in this respect like a language, one postulates a poetics which would study literature as linguistics studies language, taking its cue from linguistics wherever that seemed possible" (Ibid.). Culler was neither the first nor the last who stated that literary work should be studied in the system of literature. For example, R. Scholes notes that "no work of literature can be meaningful if we lack a sense of the literary system into which it fits" (Scholes, 1974, p. 15). Hence, it becomes evident that literary structuralism and post-structuralism are not particularly concerned with single literary works, rather focus on studying literature as a system. Accordingly, it also becomes evident that they devote more attention to explanation of certain conventions rather than interpretation of an individual literary work - "when poetics studies individual works, it seeks not to interpret them but to discover the structure and conventions of literary discourse which enable them to have the meanings they do" (Culler, 1977, pp. 7-8).

Basing on the foundations of Saussure's theory of signs, poststructuralists see the literary system as a system of signs. And, as any other system of signs, it also signifies according to the linguistic conventions. According to Barthes, Saussure described a general science of signs that considered "any system of signs" to be language" (Barthes, 1978, p. 9). He defined structuralism as "a mode of analysis of cultural artifacts which originates in the methods of contemporary linguistics" (Barthes, 1967, p. 897). Poststructuralists claim that all cultural systems

can be subjected to semiotic analysis. Semiotics as a general science of signs and sign systems observes similarities within different cultural systems at the level of abstraction that makes it possible to explain how signs produce meanings. The specific emphasis on different practices of culture, as indicated above, laid the foundation for applying cultural studies in analyzing all forms of culture, including literary texts. Therefore, together with literary semiotics and linguistic semiotics, cultural semiotics was also included into the field of research of literary system, as one of the cultural systems. This, of course, does not mean that semiotics "absorbs" linguistics, literary studies, and cultural studies, as it seems to many, rather, it offers them a unifying language to describe literary system and, thus, the possibility for interdisciplinary collaboration between these disciplines. However, as a general science of signs and sign systems, semiotics is not concerned with literary works as autonomous artifacts, instead, observes similarities within literary system. As J. Culler notes in his famous work "In Pursuit of Signs," "semiotics explicitly claimed that it sought not to generate new interpretations but to understand what made previous interpretations possible" (Culler, 2005, p. XVI). He further states: if works were indeed autonomous artifacts, there might be nothing to do but to interpret each of them, but since they participate in a variety of systems – the conventions of literary genres... the various discourses of knowledge that are found in a culture – critics can move through texts towards an understanding of the systems and semiotic processes which make them possible" (ibid., p. 13).

In a semiotic sense, any phenomenon that can produce meaning through signification, is regarded as a text. Hence, the term "text" acquires a broad general meaning – all forms of creation of culture are perceived as texts and they are approached as

constructions of signs. The focus from literary “work” is turned to “text. Text is no longer regarded as a “work”, a creation of its originator – of the author. Post-structuralism strongly rejects the traditionally accepted view of the authority of the author and believes that the source of the meaning of the text is language and culture and not the author. R. Barthes, in his famous essay, “The death of the Author”, as Peter Barry puts it, “announces the death of the author, which is a rhetorical way of asserting the independence of the literary text and its immunity to the possibility of being unified or limited by any notion of what the author might have intended, or “crafted” into the work. Instead, the essay makes a declaration of radical textual independence: the work is not determined by intention, or context. Rather, the text is free by its very nature of all such restraints. Hence, as Barthes says in his essay, the corollary of the death of the author is the birth of the reader” (Barry, 2002, p. 66).

For J. Derrida, reading, then, is not the reproducing what the writer wanted to be expressed through the text and the task of the reader is not to reconstruct a pre-existent reality, which does not belong to the text, rather, “critical reading must produce the text, since there is nothing behind it for us to reconstruct” (ibid., p. 53), suggesting that, as Derrida puts it in his famous slogan – “Il n’y a rien en dehors du texte.” (“There is nothing outside the text”).

Since the text is freed from the “Author-God”, “the claim to decipher a text becomes futile” (ibid., p. 51) and post-structuralist purpose becomes not to find the meaning of the text, but “ultimately to conceive, to imagine, to experience the plurality of the text, the open-endedness of its signifying process” (Barthes, 1988, p. 262). Barthes states: “We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing single ‘theological’ meaning (the ‘message of the Author God’) but a multi-

dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash” (Barthes, 1977, p. 146).

As a consequence, sign, for post-structuralism, is turned into a signifier for a new signified, and, therefore, for a new sign and ad infinitum. The systematic play of differences results into their constant deferral and interpretation turns into the process of endless deconstruction inside the text (see Derrida, 2016). The meanings, which are unstable and unfixed, and which have no connection with outer reality, are generated through language and not through language users. It is true, some poststructuralists acknowledge reader’s role in producing meaning in the process of reading. For Jonathan Culler, for example, meaning is simultaneously an experience of a reader and a property of a text. He claims that “the work has structure and meaning because it is read in particular ways, because these potential properties, latent in the object itself, are actualized by the theory of discourse applied in the act of reading (Culler, 1977, p. 113). However, this self-contradictory supposition (i.e. that meaning is simultaneously the property of a text and the experience of the reader) does not contradict the major convictions of post-structuralism about textual meaning: that it is language that generates meanings and that meanings are continuously deferred and indeterminate.

When Peter Barry speaks about the recurrent underlying ideas of contemporary literary criticism, in fact, he describes post-structuralist beliefs:

“The meanings within a literary work are never fixed and reliable, but always shifting, multifaceted and ambiguous. In literature, as in all writing, there is never the possibility of establishing fixed and definite meanings: rather it is characteristic of language to generate infinite webs of meanings, so that all texts are necessarily self-contradictory... literary texts, once they exist, are

viewed by theorists as independent linguistic structures whose authors are always “dead” or “absent” (Barry, 2002, p. 32).

The above characterization of the underlying convictions of contemporary literary criticism vividly demonstrates how noticeably it reflects post-structuralist milieu.

Hardly anyone will argue that the contribution made to literary theory by the prominent theories of post-structuralism discussed above is immense. However, these theories have often been acknowledged by many as highly unfruitful for interpretation of individual literary works. It has been often stated in many different guises and forms that literary semiotics does not interpret the literary work, and, accordingly, does not provide an answer what a literary work means, rather it seeks to discover the general rules and conventions which make meanings possible. Even poststructuralists, themselves, acknowledged this fact. According to Culler, “just as the task of linguistics is not to tell us what individual sentences mean but to explain according to what rules their elements combine and contrast to produce the meanings sentences have for speakers of a language, so the semiotician seeks to discover the nature of the codes which make literary communication possible” (Culler, 2005, p. 42). Guy Cooks, for example, states that “a weakness of the semiotic approach is its exclusive devotion to similarities, and then an air of finality once these similarities are observed, which blinds it to what is unique” (Cook, 1992, p. 70). The article does not aim to go into the details of the problems connected with semiotic approach, which, as mentioned, is widely used by post-structuralism for the analysis of all cultural practices, including literature. However, it is worthwhile to note that epistemological possibilities

of semiotics cannot “embrace” the ontology of literary work as a text type and as a work of art.

Nor is poststructuralist view of the author’s death sympathized by many. In his book “The Death and the Return of the Author”, Burke shows how erroneous the idea of “killing” the author is (Burke, 1999). Nor is the poststructuralist fixation on the text acceptable for many. H. Widdowson, for example, calls it “a state of textually induced trance where words suggest words suggest words suggest words in chain reactions of free association in total suspense from the real world of reference” (Widdowson, 1992, p. 190). In his view, poststructuralists “get themselves into a mystical state of detached mediation on the meaning of language... but this is not a state which user of language can afford to be in... for them it is a matter not of meditation but of mediation (Ibid., pp. 190-191). Here, Widdowson, apparently, touches upon one of the major beliefs of post-structuralism – that it is language that generates its meaning and not its users.

Conclusion

From what has been said above, if I bring down the poststructuralist convictions to the summary essentials, its major beliefs concerning text and textual meaning are that it is language that generates meaning and that meaning is unstable and indeterminate. Both, in my view, lead up too many theoretical complications whenever the problem of literary meaning interpretation is at stake. Pragmatic theories have convincingly demonstrated that language use is never divorced from its users and meaning-making process cannot be separated from producers (senders) and receivers. And, since literary text is also an artwork, I do believe that analytical aesthetics together with linguistics and pragmatics should

always be included in the interdisciplinary field of research of literary text and literary meaning. A. Pettersson, in his recent conception, gives a detailed account of text and textual meaning (see Pettersson, 2017) and argues that meaning is a mental construct – a cluster of sender's meaning, receivers' meanings

and commentators' meanings – unable to exist outside human mind. His valuable conception throws light to many controversial problems that rise in connection with textual meaning and verbal communication in general, consequently, of literary text as a text type and literary communication. Among other problems, this conception fights against all the flaws arising from standard literary theory, which, as indicated above, has poststructuralist background.

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