

“From Work to Text”

By

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The Background:

This essay by Roland Barthes is perhaps the most comprehensive and seminal contribution to the debates over the difference between the humanistic and the poststructuralist approaches to the readings of literature. Barthes' essay 'From Work to Text' is one of the most anthologized essays in the studies of literary theory.

Roland Barthes (1915- 1980), a French literary critic, is known for his serious contribution in the area of semiotics, study of signs and symbols. His is primarily a structuralist approach that considers a literary text in terms of certain structures which can be explained with specificity. However, Roland Barthes's writings defy strict classifications as many of his writings challenge the boundaries of structuralism, and quietly slip in the direction of poststructuralism. This particular essay has all the overtones of poststructuralism.

Before we explain this essay let us understand the background of the ideas that Barthes presents in this essay. In the context of this essay, we can divide the approaches to the study of literature in two categories. The first approach is very well known to us - the humanistic or the traditional approach. The second is what we call the poststructuralist approach. We can better understand these approaches by juxtaposing the basic features of the two:

1. The Writer

Humanistic approach: *The creator of the literary text is a creative genius born with creative faculty, a human self who can transcend the material conditions of life to write/ create something that is unique, organically artistic whole. The writer like God is called the creator, who is born with the creative powers to create art that promotes the human values like, kindness, morality, dignity, social values etc..*

Vs.

Poststructuralist approach: *In the poststructuralist sense the writer is considered to be a consciousness that is created by the culture, ideology, narratives, social and economic conditions etc.. His/her writings reflect the contents of his consciousness. Such content is skilfully structured in the artistic forms which have been accepted quite arbitrarily by the art community as artistic. The creative writer is not creative genius but only an assimilator. Barthes calls him the 'scriptor' as against the writer. The creative*

writer need not be 'worshipped' as creative genius; instead his consciousness needs to be analyzed for the 'stuff' that he/she has 'assembled'. As a subject he has gaps, fears, ideologies, because it is the Symbolic system that creates the person that he is.

2. The literary Text:

Humanistic approach: In the humanistic approach the literary text is considered to be artistic work, unique, inimitable, timeless, containing universal truth, essence, values, meanings and relevance.

Vs.

Poststructuralist approach: The literary text is created by the imaginative faculty of the consciousness (the so called Author), who himself is a product of ideologies. This literary text is not the storehouse of universal human values but the narrative that participates in narrating the beliefs, conventions and convictions of a particular time and place. The texts cannot claim any universal relevance and application. Their value is relative and fluid. Their value is limited to their nature, i.e. symbolic. Symbolic text, symbolic value. In the making of a literary text, the other symbolic texts participate - texts of psychology, texts of philosophy, texts of sciences, texts of sociology (all symbolic), and all other kinds of narratives and discourses. The literary text is in constant dialogue with other texts. The intertextuality of the literary text has become the most fascinating feature in the analysis and interpretation of the text. The text is in flux, always in the process of becoming, because as it interacts with other 'texts', its meaning, its relevance, value etc. becomes different. The work is stable, the text is becoming.

3. The Reader:

Humanistic Approach: The reader is considered to be a person who has the artistic sensibilities to appreciate the artistic works in relation to aesthetic pleasure that the art affords. The aesthetic pleasure of art is related to its formalistic features as well as to its universal appeal. The reader is a self that is endowed with the capacities to appreciate the art. His intervention does not alter the meaning of the work. The reader only receives the work with all its potentialities.

Vs.

Poststructuralist Approach: The reader, like the writer, is a consciousness that is created by the Symbolic system. His reading of the text is not a simple exercise but a complex act in which his own subjectivity interacts with the literary text (along with the material and ideological conditions of its time and space). Any claim of objectivity in interpretation is misplaced. The reader's response is only a personal response. All readings need re-reading, as all interpretations are fraught with the ideological prejudices.

4. Meaning:

Humanistic: Meaning in a text is universal, stable, essentialist in nature. The literary meaning is a kind of essence that is conveyed in aesthetically created artistic forms. Language functions as a medium to convey the meaning. Both form and content are artistic, they are organic wholes to create unique messages, experiences for the benefit of humanity.

Vs.

Poststructuralist: The meaning is the product of the interaction between the consciousness of the reader and the text. The contexts of the reader and that of the text are engaged in complex ways in meaning making processes. The meaning is neither unique nor essentialist, it is fluid and coloured with the thick material and ideological conditions of the text and its context. Hence the meaning needs to be constantly interrogated.

Roland Barthes's argument in this essay can be better understood by placing the humanistic perspectives on the side of the WORK; and the poststructuralist perspectives on the side of the TEXT. A literary piece can be studied either as a WORK or a TEXT, depending upon the perspective or the approach that we take. Roland Barthes' argument is that literature can no more be studied as a work. It is a text. He differentiates between the WORK and the TEXT on seven counts - method, genre, the sign, the plurality, filiation, reading, and pleasure. All these seven points can be explained in the matrix of the four given above.

The Essay Explained: "From Work to Text"

Roland Barthes begins the essay with the argument that the literary text is intertextual in nature, it is constituted by ideas that have their sources in other domains of knowledge, or other texts. A reader can appreciate a text more comprehensively if he is aware of the intertextuality, and the interdisciplinarity of the literary text.

Method: In methodological terms, the work is received by the reader as composite, organic whole, which makes sense to the reader in its totality. The organic nature of the work is essential to the holistic approach that the reader takes. The method that is used by the reader when he approaches a literary piece as a text is that of dialogic nature. As the text is in dialogue with the reader, the meaning is always evolving, 'becoming'. The methods become different when we approach the same literature either as 'work' or as 'text'. The same piece of literature either becomes 'organic' or dialogic', depending upon the method that we use to interpret the text. "the work is held in the hand, the text is held in language: it exists only as discourse".

Genre: The different genres that define the various kinds of language-narratives like biography, poetry, fiction, drama, history etc. help in creating the essentialist character of the work. The genre identifications essentialize the meanings of the language-

narratives. When we approach a language-narrative, a literary piece, as a text then the genre boundaries do not work. There is the poetic nature of history, or the historic function of poetry. The text intermingles with every kinds of text, defying neat divisions that traditionally name the text. Textuality itself is the characteristic that every text shares, that defines the nature and function of all texts - history, mythology, literature, etc. All are texts, defined by their textuality. The same literature when studied with genre divisions becomes the work, and with the erasure of genre boundaries, the text.

The Sign: “Whereas the Text is approached and experienced in relation to the sign, the work closes itself on a signified.” Literature conceived as text can be interpreted the way a language sign is interpreted. Which means, a sign= signifier+signified. The relationship between the signifier and the signified (word and its meaning) is arbitrary and conventional. If the user community gives another meaning to the word, that meaning will become THE MEANING of the word. This principle can be amplified to understand the meanings of the texts. The words have the meanings that the community decides to give them. Which community has the power to give meanings to the language? The community that has the power to use and determine the meaning of language. So the meanings of the text are fluid, in flux; concretized only by the users. When the literature is approached from the perspective of WORK, then the meaning is fixed, or mysterious/ambiguous. In any case the nature of the meaning is that it has essence, value, power, universality etc. It has permanence.

Plurality: The TEXT has plural meanings, the WORK singular. A literary TEXT is open to interpretations, a WORK closes off the interpretations.

Filiations: A WORK is studied in terms of its relations to the society, history, and the author. These three factors contribute to the essentialization of the WORK. A TEXT is independent of the authorial affiliations. Conceived in terms of TEXT, literature is free from the delimiting factors of author’s motives and intentions, the text exists only as a language-construct.

Reading: The WORK is ‘consumed’ by the reader in the sense that the reader passively receives the meanings that literature supposedly gives. On the other hand, when literature is read like a TEXT, the reader is critically engaged with the text to the extent that he actively participates in the meaning making processes. The reader becomes the co-author of the text.

Pleasure: Literary works afford us pleasure, which is generally called aesthetic pleasure. Both the form and the content, function as organic whole. All the parts, all the constituents, are arranged in way that they become artistic creations, affording pleasure through its form as well as content. The everlasting appeal of literary works flow from the fact that the reader believes in the unique character of their formalistic features as well their content. It is this unique, distinctive quality literary WORK that affords the pleasure. However, when conceived in terms of TEXT, literature affords another kind of pleasure. A TEXT is constituted by signifiers, and signifiers in their true nature are free, empty, not filled with signification. It is the reader who fills the signifiers with signified. Once the reading is over, the signifier again becomes free, empty. Every time the reader reads the text, he is engaged in creating the meaning. This is the pleasure of the text, the *jouissance* of the text.
