
“\textit{The words of a dead man}
\textit{Are modified in the guts of the living}”
W.H.Auden “\textit{In Memory of W.B. Yeats}”

Reception theory draws attention to the active role the reader plays in the reading process. Some writers exploit this awareness of the reader’s participation in the text. Shakespeare’s \textit{Othello}, T.S.Eliot’s early poetry, Roger Mc Gough’s “\textit{The Newly Pressed Suit}”, and Tony Morrison’s \textit{Jazz} will be analysed to exemplify this relationship. Language and Literature teachers need to be aware of the power of the reader in the text, and the implications this has in our classes.

\textbf{Metatextuality and the Teaching of Literature}

In modern and postmodern works, writers are aware of the power the reader holds over meaning, and so they openly establish a dialogue with the reader. Metatextual texts, which Pope defines as “texts which \textit{foreground the actual process of composition and draw attention to their own “made” status}” (Pope, 1998: 370), make us reflect on the active role which is required from the reader in any reading process. Modern literary theories back up this view: reception theory in particular, claims the reader re-creates the text.

As Language and Literature teachers, it is important we should update our practice by questioning the amount of freedom we allow our students to have in the reading process. It is only natural we should also put into question where we can ultimately find the meaning in the text. If the reader is the focus of attention in the text, does this mean there are as many meanings as readers there are? As teachers, we may be torn between our desire to make
the class learner-centred and the fear of falling into the abyss of interpretive anarchy.

It is also the purpose of this paper to show how the relationship between the reader and the text can be seen from a more philosophical perspective, which hopefully, will throw more light on the reasons that lie behind our choices. Steiner (1989) sees reading as an encounter with the other. Both reading and writing imply transcending one’s isolation and establishing a dialogue with the text. The teacher, thus, becomes a facilitator of this encounter with the other.

These considerations go hand in hand with modern literary theory. Reception theory has made us aware that reading is a subjective phenomenon, thus, there is nothing like a detached reader. The text is not an objective artifact, as New Criticism had assumed, but a symbolic one, endowed with life when the participants in the reading process accept to play their roles.

In order to show the importance the presence of the reader in the text takes up in some modern and postmodern works, and to offer some practical examples of the theoretical considerations made afterwards, we will analyse Roger Mc Gough’s “The Newly Pressed Suit”, Jazz by Toni Morrison and T.S. Eliot’s early poems. Shakespeare’s Othello will also be analysed, as the metaliterary elements which appear in the other works, are also resorted to in his play, which proves once more that Shakespeare is still our contemporary.

The power of the text over the reader

It is only natural that in developed drama the relationship between the spectator and the play should have been early. This is known as “the fourth wall” which Shakespeare seems to break at times in his plays. Much of the dramatic success in Shakespeare’s Othello lies in the feeling of impotence the spectator has when he is also trapped in “the net” created by Iago “That
shall enmesh them all” (II,iii,329). Iago is “the Strategist of Separation”, as Brennan (1994) has pointed out. His plan succeeds because he cuts off the characters from the others, but also the spectator/reader from the plot. In English pantomimes, it was customary to shout at the hero to warn him of dangers, as Brennan explains; as an audience of Othello, we are deprived of that possibility. We can do nothing but watch the hero’s downfall caused by Iago’s deception: Iago has duped the audience, too. He has played with possible motives for his hatred in his soliloquies, he has exposed the evil present in his soul and the joy derived from “the monstrous birth” that “Hell and night/ Must bring” “to the world’s light” (I, iii, 385 & 386): “Pleasure and action make the hours seem short” (II, iii, 344), and we feel uneasy at this feeling of intimacy with his evil soul, which makes us conspirators, and impotent observers at the same time. The feeling is similar to having a nightmare, where we are involved but we cannot interfere with the course of events.

At the end of the play, it is indeed paradoxical, as Kott (1967) points out, that Iago’s conception of the world triumphs over Othello’s, and yet the outcome works against him. Iago’s final silence preceding Othello’s recovered beauty of speech is the true restoration of order the play offers us:

“Demand me nothing; what you know, you know.
From this time forth I never will speak a word” (V, ii).

In Shakespeare’s play we feel helpless and cheated. What the text ultimately asserts is the character’s power over us. Some Marxist critics, like Terry Eagleton (1983:14), warn us about the role “the power-structure and power-relations of the society we live in” play in literature. In Othello, the power over the reader maintained by the play is crucial to our understanding of the reading process.

This dominant relationship is also assumed in Roger Mc Gough’s poem “The Newly Pressed Suit”, but another interesting conception of the reading
phenomenon is also stressed. From the very start, we are invited to play a role in the poem: what is emphasised is the ludic aspect of reading,

“Here is a poem for the two of us to play
Choose any part from the following:
The hero
The heroine
The bed
The bedroom
The newly pressed suit”

The voice of the text tells us:

“(I will play the villain)”.

George Steiner explains this view of reading:

“We must now face, indeed, disport ourselves within a universe of games in which semiotic structures and their messages are boundless, often discontinuous chains of differentiation and deferral” (Steiner, 1989:124).

But far from being an endless and senseless chain, in this game we learn about ourselves and about the reading transaction.

“The poem begins late this evening
at a poetryreading
Where the hero and the heroine
Are sitting and drinking and thinking
of making love”

The characters intend to lead their own lives, independent of the other participants. It is interesting to notice that the title of the poem is one of the
roles the reader may take up. If he does so, he will be the simile used to compare the heroine as she is placed gently upon the bed:

“At 10.30 they leave the pub and hurry home.
Once inside the flat they waste no time.
The hero quickly undresses the heroine,
carries her naked into the bedroom
and places her gently upon the bed
like a newly pressed suit”.

Again as in Shakespeare’s play, the reader- spectator is involved in the process blatantly, as the “fourth wall” is broken. The reader is no longer a reality but a literary device and thus, a representation of reality, on whom a certain violence is exerted by the text, which ironically enough, has control over reality instead of merely representing it. In this poem, as in Othello, the text shows us our limitations and vulnerability. The poem is in control all the time. No matter what role we might have chosen, we are abused:

“Just then I step into the poem.
With a sharp left hook
I render unconscious the hero
And with a cruel laugh
Rape the heroine”

His joy in evil reminds us of Iago. The voice then remarks sarcastically:

“Thank you for playing.
When you go out tonight
I hope you have better luck in your poem
Than you had in mine.”

Ultimately, we realize that in one way or another “The ‘otherness’ which enters into us makes us other” (Steiner, 1989: 188), as the boundaries
between fact and fiction are transgressed. In the poem, this is also represented in the rape itself.

**The developing relationship between the reader and the text**

Whereas in *Othello* and “The Newly Pressed Suit” the texts hold power over the reader, in T. S. Eliot’s poems we can trace the persona’s fear of ridicule. In “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”, the voice does not formulate the “overwhelming question” because “in short, [he is] afraid” partly because he thinks he will not be understood:

“Would it have been worth while
If one, settling a pillow or throwing off a shawl,
And turning toward the window, should say:
‘That is not it at all,
That is not what I meant at all.”

And so, he concludes,

“No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;
Am an attendant lord, one that will do
To swell a progress, start a scene or two.”

He decides not to question his identity and the role he is expected to play, as Hamlet did. Nevertheless, we are aware of the presence of the Dante–like poet, thanks to the parallelism with Dante’s *Divine Comedy* established in the epigraph. The poem starts: “Let us go then, you and I” The “I” is Prufrock, whose “deliberations” we learn about, and the “you” may be the Dante-like poet who bears witness to what he has learnt, perhaps to purify men’s souls, as Dante intended to do by writing his poem. He listens to Prufrock’s ponderings, and does not “drown” and escape into “the chambers of the sea”
as the main character apparently does, but commits himself by writing the poem.

Eliot’s preoccupation about the reception of his art also appears in “The Waste Land”. The mythological reference to Philomel shows us that the persona knows that the world will not understand that the restoration of the land and the renewal of spiritual life lies in personal sacrifice:

“The change of Philomel, by the barbarous king
So rudely forced; yet there the nightingale
Filled all desert with inviolable voice
And still she cried, and still the world pursues,
‘Jug Jug’ to dirty years.”

Philomel is turned into a nightingale as she is raped, but her beautiful song will be considered vulgar and compared to any other bird’s song. In the same way, in Kyd’s Spanish Tragedy, alluded to at the end of “The Waste Land”, the characters thought Hieronymo to be mad: “Why then Ile fit you. Hieronymo’s mad againe”, but Hieronymo, like Hamlet was mad for a purpose and in reality he was revealing the deepest truth. In spite of his fear of reaching over to otherness:

“we think of the key, each in his prison,
Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison”

the persona continues his quest because as Eliot writes in “Preludes”:

“I am moved by fancies that are curled
Around these images, and cling:
The notion of some infinitely gentle
Infinitely suffering thing”
The suffering of others compels him to write and continue the journey through and out of the modern wasteland. In “Gerontion”, he conveys his feeling of moral responsibility: “After that knowledge, what forgiveness.”

The poetic voice in Eliot’s poems is afraid of reaching over and being despised, which makes us aware of the power, and the responsibility we have over the text, which opens up to us, and expects a warm welcome and cooperation. In Jazz, by Toni Morrison, this intimacy becomes a lot more explicit. The novel gives us hints from the start that the narrator is the book itself:

“I haven’t got any muscles, so I can’t really be expected to defend myself”.

The text wins you over, in spite of the ironic tone, when it reveals it needs your attention and cooperation:

“People say I should come out more. Mix. I agree that I close off in places, but if you have been left standing, as I have, while your partner overstays at another appointment, or promises to give you exclusive attention after supper, but is falling asleep just as you have begun to speak—well, it can make you inhospitable if you aren’t careful, the last thing I want to be.”

By endowing the text with an identity and making it address the reader directly, the author has really killed herself to show the deep truth about reading:

“Schleiermacher’s famous postulate whereby the reader can make out more of the authentic intent and significance of the text than could its author is fundamental to modern hermeneutics” (Steiner, 1989: 173).

Not only do we become aware of the independent existence of the text, but the characters seem to acquire identities that grow away from the text.
once they have been generated. This is shown very subtly through the use of stream of consciousness techniques. At first, the conventional mode of an omniscient author-text is used:

“They are all like that, these women. Waiting for the ease, the space that need not be filled with anything other than the drift of their own thoughts. But they wouldn’t like it. They are busy and thinking of ways to be busier because such a space of nothing pressing to do would knock them down.”

Later on, the text is still the filter when indirect interior monologue is used, but now we experience reality as the character does. Alice is thinking about the man who killed her niece, and he is depicted in this way:

“[he is] liked among the women because he made them feel like girls; liked by girls because he made them feel like women— which, she thought, was what Dorcas was looking for. Murderer.”

The use of direct interior monologue afterwards seems to mark the apparent disappearance of the text’s intervention: the characters now seem to assert their own individuality, but on the other hand the stream shows there is no audience assumed either, so the characters have broken free from the reader, too. Violet thinks about her husband and his teenage lover:

“drinking rough gin with that sweet red stuff in it so it looked like soda pop, which a girl like her ought to have ordered instead of liquor she could sip from the edge of a glass wider at the mouth than at its base, with a tiny stem like a flower in between while her hand, the one that wasn’t holding the glass shaped like a flower, was under the table drumming out the rhythm on the inside of his thigh, his thigh, his thigh, thigh, thigh, and he bought her underwear with stitching done to look like rosebuds and violets, VIOLETS, don’t you know, …while I was
where? Sliding on ice trying to get to somebody’s kitchen to do their hair”.

After the characters gain more power, which is shown through the use of direct interior monologue, the text does not sound so confident as at the beginning of the novel. It no longer knows the characters’ inner lives, as it wonders why Violet’s mother could have committed suicide:

“What was the thing, I wonder, the one and final thing she had not been able to endure or repeat? Had the last washing split the shirtwaist so bad it could not take another mend and changed his name to rag? Perhaps word had reached her about the four-day hangings in Rocky Mount”,

and he continues this questioning, which shows that the characters have become independent of the text. The reality or meaning generated is independent of the written word, and, strikingly, of the reader, too. This revelation affects the text deeply,

“I thought I knew them and wasn’t worried that they really didn’t know me. Now it’s clear why they contradicted me at every turn: they knew me all along”.

He then questions his own identity:

“What, I wonder, what would I be without a few brilliant spot of blood to ponder?”. 

Finally, the text itself develops: it has learnt that it cannot control the plot and the characters any longer, that it is “Risky, I’d say, trying to figure out anybody’s state of mind”, and that it had been “confused in [its] solitude into arrogance, thinking [its] space, [its] view was the only one that was or that mattered”.
This effect is what David Lodge (1992, p. 209) calls “a typical metafictional move – what Erving Goffman has called ‘breaking the frame’”, which he explains as follows: “The author seems to be suddenly losing faith in his own story”. Stories call attention to their own fictional status and their own compositional procedures. Lodge writes:

“Metafiction, then, is not a modern invention; but it is a mode that many contemporary writers find particularly appealing, weighed down, as they are, by their awareness of their literary antecedents, oppressed by the fear that whatever they might have to say has been said before, and condemned to self-consciousness by the climate of modern culture.” (1992: 207)

Later, the narrator realises that “It is only when our characters and events begin to disobey us that they begin to live”. And it is noteworthy that this life the characters assume is abused in “The Newly Pressed Suit”: the characters are thinking of making love, but the author-text has another fate for them in mind. However, in Jazz, the characters not only acquire freedom, but what is emphasised is that the text acquires a life of its own, independent of the author, and can address the reader and relate to the characters in ways never thought of by the writer.

At the end of Jazz not only does the text develop, but the anagnorisis works on the reader him/herself. First, the text introduces the revelation by explaining what it has learnt:

“I started out believing that life was made just so the world would have some way to think about itself, but that it had gone awry with humans because flesh, pinioned by misery, hangs to it with pleasure [...] Something is missing there. Something rogue. Something else you have to figure in before you can figure out.”
The characters have taught it that love is possible, and so it now dares to tell us:

“I envy them their public love. I myself have only known it in secret, shared it in secret and longed to show it – to be able to say out loud what they have no need to say at all: That I have loved only you, surrendered my whole self reckless to you and nobody else. That I want you to love me back and show it to me. That I love the way you hold me, how close you let me be to you. I like your fingers on and on, lifting, turning. I have watched your face for a long time now, and missed your eyes when you went away from me. Talking to you and hearing you answer – that’s the kick.”

After this recognition, we are asked to commit ourselves, to requite the text’s love for us:

“But I can’t say that aloud; I can’t tell anyone that I have been waiting for this all my life and that being chosen to wait is the reason I can. If I were able I’d say it. Say make me, remake me. You are free to do it and I am free to let you because look, look. Look where your hands are.”

In this ending, the text reaches over to us in ways that go beyond words, and which enter the realms of the ineffable. The text makes literature–lovers aware of the fact that whenever we read a book we enter the domains of otherness and are, in turn, transformed.

It is important to point out that the analysis of Othello at the beginning of this essay is not gratuitous. Shakespeare has paved the way for all the metaliterary considerations that arise in the modern and postmodern works analysed. Iago is not only the embodiment of evil, as Coleridge (1994) pointed out. He seems to be the embodiment of the power the text can hold over the
spectator-reader as well. His silence at the end of the play represents in a way the impenetrability of otherness, and our entry into the domains of the ineffable. We, like Othello, ask “Why he hath thus ensnared my soul and body” (V,ii, 299). Even if the question remains unanswered, and thus we are left unsatisfied, his silence in the text represents his death, as it is language that endows characters with life. What remains only is our imagination, which may lead us to come to some conclusions about his reasons, and in that way, the reader, once and for all, prevails and triumphs over Iago -- and following our metaliterary interpretation -- over the oppressive control of the text.

**Facing Death of the Self in the Encounter with the Other**

Holland has stated that: “we actively transact literature so as to re-create our identities” (Holland, 1988: 206). He explained that,

“the organism’s most basic motivation is to maintain its identity. Indeed, we will even die to be true to what we hold fundamental to our being. So strong is identity, it defines what the pleasure and the reality of the other principles are” (Holland, 1988: 207)

But the question that arises here is, can we really maintain our identities? Fowles writes in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*,

“But this is preposterous? A character is either ‘real’ or ‘imaginary’? If you think that, ‘hypocrite lecteur’, I can only smile”.

“Hypocrite lecteur” is an allusion to Baudelaire’s “Fleurs du Mal”, which appears in “The Waste Land”: “You! Hypocrite lecteur! –mon semblable,–mon frere!”; the persona in Eliot’s poem shows us that we are also part of the moral and spiritual wasteland that he is depicting. And, after all, is the threat of losing or changing our identities not part of the challenge and enjoyment of literature? We regain life only by plunging into the abyss of otherness.
The texts analysed in this paper have shown us that, on the one hand, the relationship the reader establishes with the text can be one of power, submission, or even love, but, on the other hand, we have learnt that it requires our cooperation to let it into our lives, and shape it again according to our identities. The text also dies to be remade by the reader. We must be aware that the reading process is twofold: “There is language, there is art, because there is ‘the other’” (Steiner, 1989: 137). Reading, then, becomes a bridge into otherness. The more we become aware of that bridge and the form it takes, the more we will understand the reading process, and ultimately ourselves.

The Role of the Teacher in the Reading Process

After analysing the role the reader is expected to play, and how modern and postmodern writers are daunted by the awareness of the small power they have over meaning-- in a way, of their approaching death, which Barthes proclaimed-- it is imperative we should consider the theoretical and philosophical assumptions that sustain these claims. As explained before, reception theory insists on the focus of attention the reader should have:

“The whole point of reading, for a critic like Iser, is that it brings us into deeper self-consciousness, catalyses a more critical view of our identities. It is as though what we have been ‘reading’, in working our way through a book is ourselves.” (Eagleton, 1983: 79).

But if reading facilitates an encounter with ourselves, it also implies being transformed in turn, as the previous texts have shown us.

The threat that looms if we adhere to the view that we constantly re-write our own identities in the text is the chaos of the randomness of meaning. Much work has been done on theory lately to avoid total interpretive anarchy, to pin down the oscillating structure of meaning in the text. Fish believes the
answer lies in the notion of interpretive communities, which “are made up of those who share interpretive strategies” (Fish, 1988: 238).

Another way of explaining the continuity or unity of interpretations is provided by Culler, who speaks about the “knowledge and skill involved in reading literature: skill which can be imparted” (Culler, 1980: 52). To him, the literature teacher’s task is to teach these interpretive strategies. The answer to the danger of falling into interpretive anarchy, for a critic like Culler lies in the concept of literary competence, thus he says,

“Interpretation is not a random process, and so it is quite possible to explain how disagreements are produced by the application of common though complex displacements.” (Culler, 1980: 65)

Sometimes, we may feel that those “common displacements” are far too frequent, and we have our serious doubts about how random interpretation may become.

On the other hand, in the same way as the authors in the texts analysed are aware of the despotism they might adopt over the readers and the text, teachers should beware of authoritarianism as well. “‘Literature’, as Roland Barthes once remarked, ‘is what gets taught.” (Eagleton, 1983: 197). Shocking as this may sound, it is a good reminder to check our practice. Mc Gough parodied the author’s authoritarian attitude by playing the role of the villain who raped the heroine; we could even read this metaphor as a reference to the teacher’s possibly despotic control as well.

Another interesting theory which explains the reading process is put forth by deconstruction. Post-structuralists assert that,

“All literary texts are woven out of other literary texts, […] all literature is ‘intertextual’.” (Eagleton, 1983: 138)

When we read, we construct a web in which we make connections between different literary works, the historical context and other kinds of knowledge.
The teacher should thus encourage the students’ construction of such mental webs.

Is meaning immanent or transcendental to the text?

When we look into the reading process, we will most probably realize we can never be sure we hold meaning or absolute truth. All the nails that pin down the meaning in the text, and which have been mentioned before, are powerful tools in our search. But we also have to be aware that there is a philosophical question behind all literary theories which inform literature teaching. Modern theories seem to be based on the belief that meaning is immanent to the text, i.e. it originates from it, and after it. It is not transcendental: it cannot be found in a reality before the text. And again, let me state that this is also a value-judgement. Barthes wrote,

“In precisely this way literature (it would be better from now on to say writing), by refusing to assign a ‘secret’, an ultimate meaning to the text (and to the world as text), liberates what may be called an anti-theological activity, and activity that is truly revolutionary since to refuse to fix meaning is, in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases – reason, science, law” (Barthes, 1988: 156).

Let us contrast this ideological statement with George Steiner’s,

“All good art and literature begin in immanence. But they do not stop there, […] poiesis opens on to, is underwritten by, the religious and the metaphysical. The questions: ‘What is poetry, music, art?, ‘How can they not be?’, ‘How do they act upon us and how do we interpret their action?’, are, ultimately, theological questions.” (Steiner, 1989: 227)

Steiner believes that even when in practice the meaning in the text cannot be found, because “its context is the world” (Steiner, 1978: 26), in theory it can:
there is somewhere a reference that will solve the riddle, either in the physical or the metaphysical world.

By presenting these two binary oppositions: scepticism and faith in the search for meaning, it was my intention to make you aware of the ideological and philosophical questions that lie behind our options, rather than undermine their meaning as deconstructionists will have it. If “all education is about opening doors” (Gibson, 1998: 6) we might wonder from time to time what doors we are opening, if they all belong to the same house, if so, why, and last but not least, where these doors lead.
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