

## An Interdisciplinary Approach in Interpreting Literature beyond the Text

Dr. Sofiane Maafa  
University of Tamanrasset (Algeria)

**Abstract:** As long as language remains the medium of literature both in its written and oral forms, and as long as the writer relies on this shared system of communication to deliver the message to the reader via a literary text; it is therefore safe to assume that in order for the reader to attain full interpretation of a literary text a more effective linguistic interpretation is required. During the process of decoding the text, an operation of multiple linguistic approaches takes place; usually involving the social, psychological, and cultural backgrounds by the time of the production of the text. Hence, the present article will attempt to highlight how the meaning of a literary text is accomplished both inside and outside the text. That is to say, that the reader's social, psychological and cultural background is also as relevant by the time of reading the text. The present article, will then highlight the difficulties the readers are confronted with when reading and interpreting literary texts, due to the interwoven and intertwined literary genres and styles; for this reason both linguistic and literary scholars have been struggling with finding the best linguistic formula to achieve the required smooth and successful intended meaning from the author to the reader. As a conclusion, the author will attempt to determine which linguistic approach is more effective to attain a full and successful interpretation of a literary text, beyond the text. Is it going to be a context-oriented approach, text-oriented approach, author-oriented approach, reader-oriented approach? Or all together?

**Keywords:** Interdisciplinary Approach, Linguistics, Stylistics, Literary Text, Language.

### Introduction

During the nineteenth century, the study of literature grew to become more professional; thus the study of literary texts necessitated to be treated and approached as a particular branch of knowledge or science. This necessity gave birth to one of the most prominent branches of knowledge which is literary studies. The latter has had its own successes worldwide; however, becoming a discipline required a specific set of methods and techniques by which to define concepts such as literature as well as literary texts.

Reading literary texts is not a fully independent operation as some may tend to believe. Actually, it is a very complex operation often calling for other disciplines to interfere. These disciplines, in return, are found obliged to call for certain mechanisms and approaches in order to achieve a successful flow of the author's ideas to the reader's mind. The major discipline which is concerned with studying and inventing the most effective approaches and mechanisms to better decode and interpret literary texts is Linguistics.

Linguistics is commonly defined as the scientific study of language. Its major scope of study lies in studying the general structure of language. However, scholars including linguists and literary critics have often been concerned of the most effective ways and methods by which to attain the best interpretation of literary texts; it is why it became a pressing issue to come up with new approaches in order to facilitate the process of decoding literary language.

In fact, the medium of communication which is language is considered to be a very complex system ever to be used by human beings. What makes it harder to approach is that its user, the human being, is even more complex than this system of communication. People around the world do not write and speak using the same language, actually people of the same country or region might have dissimilarities regarding the language being used; this is known as dialect variety and even sometimes members of the same family may experience a slight difference in language use.

This phenomenon is due to the difference between people around the world, in the same country or region and even inside the one family. In fact, the same person might experience a change in language use from one day to the next. This situation is governed by different criteria, mainly, social, cultural and psychological. These criteria play a crucial role in determining which state the individual (reader) is in during the process of text decoding, and there is no way to ignore any of them.

The present paper will be closely dealing with the various approaches and methods, both linguistic and literary, in order to attain the most effective formula which might enable the reader to understand literary texts; beyond the text. This complex operation is not impossible as it might seem, rather it is based on factual approaches, linguistic as well as literary. In this paper, the author will seek to analyze each linguistic approach by offering a general insight to each approach. Then, the author will seek to clarify the distinctive characteristics featuring each approach. In the end, the author will deduce the best approach which will finally enable the reader to understand literary texts beyond the text, thus the question: which factors affect the understanding of literary texts the most? In other words, which linguistic approach is the most effective in understanding and interpreting literary texts?

## **I. Literature Review**

There is a general belief held that when approaching literary texts, Linguistics ignores everything except the text. Well, this is not based on any factual evidence; rather linguistic approaches extend far to cover the social, cultural, psychological, historical and even political features of language. Since Linguistics is regarded as the global science of language, it is thus its responsibility to extend its approaches beyond the text.

However, before linguists really started to approach literary texts there was a strange and general reluctance to do so; as if they were, for some reason, excluding literary language and texts from their studies and theories. According to Roman Jakobson (1960), this strange reluctance and hesitation is due to the “poetic incompetence of some bigoted linguists” (p. 377). Therefore, according to Jakobson it is not that Linguistics fails to interpret literary texts beyond the texts; rather it is the poetic incompetence of some linguists which prevents them from approaching literary texts.

Furthermore, Jakobson explains the more common stereotypical linguistic definition of the literary text in that the latter is merely “a message of its own sake” (p.356). However, using

the more accurate definition of Robert Scholes (1982) who defines the literary text as "the product of a person or persons, at a given point in human history, in a given form of discourse, taking its meanings from the interpretive gestures of individual readers using the grammatical, semantic, and cultural codes available to them" (p.16).

Therefore, based on the aforementioned arguments, it is safe to say that any literary text can never be isolated from the social, psychological, cultural, historical as well as political circumstances surrounding it by the time of its production. Not only this, but also the social, psychological, cultural, historical as well as political circumstances of the reader also affect the understanding and interpretation of the literary text by the time of reading it.

Consequently, both linguistics and linguists have no choice but to study and interpret literary texts beyond the text. In fact, there is an entire branch called pragmatic linguistics which is concerned mainly with the interpretation of literary texts taking into consideration the various social, psychological, cultural, historical and political circumstances which closely affect the final interpretation of a literary text. Thus, it is safe to claim that in order to apply an interdisciplinary critical approach on any literary text, it is crucial to involve the aforementioned circumstances of the reader as well as author.

#### A. Text Intricacy

The term text has been under scrutiny for the past hundreds of years. What is a text? Is there one type of text? Or are there many? The word text is believed to have a relation to textile which means fabric, and just like fabric letters and words form the fabric of text. Therefore, it is safe to say that a text is a body of letters and words which are woven together to fabric meaning.

There has been a fierce debate of which area of expertise is concerned with the study of texts; is it Linguistics? Or Literary Criticism? The answer is both. As a result to the great variety of disciplines and theories trying to study language, many modern scholars and critics have come to the conclusion that any study related to fiction, poetry and drama is the area of expertise of literary criticism; whereas any study related to non-fictional works is the concern of Linguistics. As a result, a term emerged called text type.

The objective of text type is, of course, to facilitate and distinguish whose area of expertise is at play. There are of course many types of texts; but mainly texts can be categorized as literary and non-literary.

##### 1. *Literary Text*

Before speaking about literary texts, it is important to talk about literature. The latter is in return complex to define. So, what is literature? Derived from the Latin word *litteratura* which means letter, literature means any written or spoken form of language. In this sense, literature is further sub-divided into fiction and non-fiction. Fiction includes novels, novellas, short stories, poems and plays. Whereas, non-fiction includes newspapers, essays, articles, biographies and autobiographies, documentaries, reports, phone books, restaurant menus and memoirs.

Before reaching its higher and intricate status, literature was not always so sophisticated. Instead, in its earliest forms it was so simple to rely on visual signs. Indeed, even the prehistoric man sought to leave a trace of his existence which could outlast him and be able to tell his story. The prehistoric man, or as some prefer to call him caveman, felt the necessity to come up with a medium by which to express himself. At that time literary language was simplified to the use of signs and drawings on caves walls. Despite their scarcity, due to natural phenomena, these signs met the prehistoric man's expectations and did in fact outlast him. Not only this, but also these signs are worth thousands of modern linguistic expressions; where numerous archeologists as well as sign scholars have published thousands of books and articles trying to explain and interpret the true meaning of these signs.

Moreover, literature was not always written; in fact in prehistoric times the oral tradition was so widespread. Folktales, poems and legends were not written, instead they were memorized by heart, narrated and passed on from one generation to the next. Truly, in most of cultures around the world, possessing a written language was a luxury many could not afford. The Arabs, Persians Greeks and Romans were all competing to come up with a more intricate written system of language in order to register and store their literary heritage.

Literature has, thus, undergone many transformations to finally be in the modern form. Mario Klarer (1999) summarizes the meaning of literature as:

The entirety of written expression, with the restriction that not every written document can be categorized as literature in the more exact sense of the word. The definitions, therefore, usually include additional adjectives such as "aesthetic" or "artistic" to distinguish literary works from texts of everyday use such as telephone books, newspapers, legal documents and scholarly writings (p. 01).

As a result, the term literary text has been used to distinguish it from other types of texts. Amid the confusion of what literature is, scholars and critics have cleared the smoke off the term by allocating two major categories; literary and non-literary texts. The latter, also, have their own intricacy and diversity.

## ***2. Non-Literary Text***

All the non-fictional texts are grouped under the category of non-literary texts. As it has been argued before that non-literary texts is the area of expertise of Linguistics. Indeed, modern Linguistics has been so feverishly attempting to study hundreds of texts which were once considered literary as worthless. This operation was done for the purpose of finding new expressions beyond the literary ones.

As the term text type, another term was born as a result to the Linguistic study of non-literary texts which is discourse. The latter stands for any expression classified as linguistic. The term discourse of course later developed various sub-branches; mainly literary discourse. The latter, in return, has been the subject of a lot of controversies; whether it is a linguistic branch,

critical branch or a whole independent discipline of its own. Therefore, non-literary texts have grown as a result to the strict literary conventions which ruled out many texts labeling them as worthless as well as non-literary.

## **B. Critical Approaches in Interpreting Literary Texts:**

One of the most challenging issues of modern time's criticism is the interpretation and understanding of literary texts. Critical studies have been trying to ease the comprehension of literary texts by implementing various approaches which would culminate in attaining the full and smooth link between speaker (author) and listener (reader). As a matter of fact, there are many critical approaches; both linguistic and literary which are designed to help the author deliver his/her ideas and the reader to properly receive those ideas. Below are the most common critical approaches which are designed to interpret and understand literary texts.

### ***1. Reader-Oriented Approach***

The reader-oriented approach is one of the essential critical approaches in understanding and interpreting literary texts. The author cannot possibly dream to properly deliver his/her message without the reader's interaction with his/her text. Furthermore, according to this approach the text always remains the same; it is however the readers' different readings which changes meaning in the text, thus giving it different interpretations.

The reader-oriented approach centers text interpretation on the reader's reading experience. This approach does not treat the text in any special way, more than a subject matter; the most important activity is the one executed by the reader and which gives the text a reasonable interpretation and a true meaning. Thus, without the reader's reading experience a literary text cannot possibly aspire to produce any aesthetic meaning whatsoever.

Wilfred L. Guerin et. al. (2005) explain how meaning inside a literary text is the production of mainly the reader, arguing:

Meaning in a literary work is not something to be extracted, as a dentist might pull a tooth; meaning must be negotiated by readers, a line at a time. Moreover, they will be surprised by rhetorical strategies as they proceed. Meaning is what happens to readers during this negotiation [...] could lead readers on, even set them up, to make certain interpretations, only to undercut them later and force readers into new and different readings. So, the focus is on the reader; the process of reading is dynamic and sequential (pp. 358-359).

Therefore, the production of meaning inside a literary text cannot possibly take place without the contribution and "negotiation" of the reader which is vital. In addition, the argument mentioned above, further implies that not only does the reader play the biggest role in the production of meaning in a literary text but also create a whole new piece of literary work every time he/she produces a new meaning.

As a result, any literary work is governed by what is known as the Reception Theory. That is to say that it is the public reception which determines which literary work is good and which is not; regardless of how the author thinks himself/herself how their literary work might be.

However, there is one condition and that the reader or public must be well-established. That is to say that they must acquire a higher critical level with a responsibility to judge which literary work is good and which is not.

### ***2. Text-Oriented Approach***

The text-oriented approach stresses its emphasis on the structure of the text to derive meaning. A literary text must possess certain linguistic, semantic as well as stylistic features which enable it deliver a certain meaning; thus making it distinctive from another text. Rutger J. Allan & Michel Buijs (2007) insist on “the great importance of linguistic analysis for literary interpretation” (p. 2). Thus, according to this approach, no matter how many readings are there of the one text, the latter will deliver the same interpretation every time.

The text-oriented approach is more concerned with the stylistic and aesthetic features of the literary text. Meaning is, therefore, coded and embedded within the language choice of the literary text. Once the linguistic features are deciphered whether by the critic or the reader meaning of the text will always stay the same. Therefore, it is the text which holds meaning and not the reader’s interpretation to it, since the text is regarded as the primary source of knowledge. In this sense, the various interpretations of the literary text will do nothing but destroy the original meaning intended by the author.

The text-oriented approach does not appreciate any interpretation outside the realm of the actual text. Instead, this approach is more into the language structure of the literary text; the very constituents of the text such as: choice of words (adjectives, verbs, nouns, etc.), intonation, tone and figurative language. Therefore, any attempt of interpretation of the literary text must scan through these language constituents.

Mario Klarer (1999) explains that while implementing a text-oriented approach on a literary text, any “extra-textual factors concerning the author (his or her biography, other works), audiences (race, class, gender, age, education) or larger contexts (historical, social or political conditions) are deliberately excluded from the analysis” (p. 76). Thus, meaning is only derived through the textual body alone and any other factor outside the body of the literary text is not counted for.

### ***3. Author-Oriented Approach***

The author-oriented approach dates back to the nineteenth century (19<sup>th</sup> C.), when the literary text was crucially linked to the author’s biography; where facts, events and dates of the author’s personal life are paralleled with literary elements of his/her literary work. The objective of such a study is to find common elements between the author’s background and his/her literary work, in order to better understand and interpret the literary text.

Moreover, in order to better attain a more accurate interpretation of a literary text, a research in the author’s library is conducted where his/her reading bibliography which further includes personal letters as well as diaries are thoroughly examined in order to be associated with

the literary text; thus being able to reach the ultimate interpretation and understanding of the literary text.

Autobiographies constitute the very foundation of the author-oriented approach, in that they provide the study with the essential critical tools which enable the critic to establish a safe interpretation of the literary text. Autobiographies are, thus, the database which offers the necessary information regarding the author's personal background as well as his/her literary work. In this respect, the author might find it difficult to avoid the interference of his/her personal background with the literary text.

Furthermore, it is important for the author-oriented approach to refer to the author's sub-conscious and its tight connection which unavoidably impacts the literary text. Some authors have come to understand the gravity of this approach which might unveil the mask off their fictional works; thus many of these authors have grown reluctant to offer any comments or interviews regarding their literary works out of fear that critics might establish a connection between their personal life and literary works. Such authors include the American J.D. Salinger who published the famous *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) and who has been quite reluctant to offer any public interview for the past few decades.

#### 4. *Context-Oriented Approach*

The context-oriented approach is a term which might refer to a variety of approaches at the same time. Depending on the critical situation, the context-oriented approach can be based on historical, social and political backgrounds. The approach can further extend to encompass important features such as literary genre, nationality and gender. Recently, Literary History has been considered as the most influential movement. The latter attempts to study and divide literary works into historical periods, for the purpose of understanding how historical events could influence literary writing.

The second major concern of the context-oriented approach is the social aspect. The latter is represented through what is known as the Marxist Literary Theory; which attempts to explain and interpret literary texts under the influence of the social, economic as well as political factors by the time of the production of the literary text. Thus, any author would be influenced by the social, economic and political conditions by the time of producing the text.

A good example of a context-oriented approach would be Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* (1838) where the Marxist Literary Theory for instance views *Oliver Twist* together with the entire concept of orphanages, child labor and crime as the result of the Industrial Revolution which was sweeping over Europe and the United States of America during the nineteenth century (19<sup>th</sup> C). Therefore, being impacted by the Industrial Revolution, Charles Dickens had no way to escape its influence which he reflected through his novel *Oliver Twist*.

The context-oriented approach further studies, through its Marxist Literary Theory, the influence of gender and race. The latter have given birth to various political and social-literary movements such as Feminism, African-American movements, Colonialism and Post-Colonialism.

Therefore, according to the context-oriented approach, social, economic, political, gender and race criticism exert the major influence on any literary works.

### **5. Interdisciplinary Approach**

An Interdisciplinary Approach is an approach which seeks to combine all the aforementioned approaches together. This approach not only stresses the importance of each single approach, but also that combined together these approaches produce the ultimate tool when attempting to interpret literary texts. Oscar Cargill (1965) argues that:

I have always held that any method which could produce the meaning of a work of literature was a legitimate method. . . .I came to the conclusion that . . . the critic's task was . . . to procure a viable meaning appropriate to the critic's time and place. Practically, this meant employing not any one method in interpreting a work of art but every method which might prove efficient (xii-xiv).

Based on Cargill's argument, one can easily discern the ultimate importance of the interdisciplinary approach in interpreting and understanding literary texts. Thus, when applying this approach on any literary text, the reader or critic is finally able to cover all sides of the text; social, psychological, economic, political, historical, structural and cultural.

Therefore, based on the interdisciplinary approach, the reader or critic cannot take the literary text independently; rather various approaches and methods come at play. In this sense, the critical study must cover the context of the literary text (author's biography as well as economic, social and historical backgrounds), reader's status by the time of reading the literary text (cultural, psychological, economic, social, political as well as historical background) and the structure of the text where elements constituting the body of the literary text are approached (author's aesthetic and stylistic effects).

### **Conclusion**

As a conclusion and after studying the four major critical approaches to literary texts, the author concludes that each of the four approaches are essential in any interpretation of a literary text. In order to better understand a literary text, the critic must be aware of the possible available approaches. Not only must the critic be aware of the approaches, but he/she must also be able to know the method of how to implement them on a literary text to attain the full interpretation of the literary text beyond the text.

David Daiches (1956) argues that: "Every effective literary critic sees some facet of literary art and develops an awareness with respect to it but the total vision, or something approximating it, comes only to those who learn how to blend the insights yielded by many critical approaches" (393). Thus, any established critic must know how to combine the different critical approaches into one interdisciplinary approach to cover all sides of the literary text.

The interdisciplinary approach is enables the critic as well as the reader to better understand the author's intended discourse. This approach allows the reader to have a multi-level understand of the literary text; cognitive, social, historical, political, semantic, and grammatical.



Through this multi-level approach, both the critic and reader are finally able to approach the literary text both intra-linguistically as well as extra-linguistically.

Therefore, the critic must not ignore or favor one approach over another when interpreting a literary text; instead he/she must approach the literary text from a social, historic, political, economic, cultural, grammatical as well as semantic aspect. Once the critic is able to combine all these together when interpreting the literary text; only then a full understanding of a literary text can be said to be achieved.

In the end, the interdisciplinary approach focuses on both the reader's awareness as well as pre-cognitive knowledge and the author's discourse abilities in order to be able to implement the various critical approaches combined altogether. Therefore, any deficiency in this equation and the entire operation falters and fails.

So, to have a good understanding of the literary text beyond the text, a well-established reader is required whose cognitive as well as pre-knowledge of the text are the key elements to understanding the text. The author's discourse abilities are also equally important since he/she is the producer of the subject matter. Finally, and after ensuring the readiness of both the reader and author, comes the role of the interdisciplinary approach to cover the author, reader and text from all sides. Going through this intricate operation is the interdisciplinary approach.

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