

Post-Structuralism

Wolfgang Iser: "The Interaction Between Text
and Reader"

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An Introduction to Post-Structuralism

- “Poststructuralism therefore is not an abandonment of structure but rather a critical reflection upon its dynamics.” (Payne 437).”
- It combines elements of reader-response criticism and deconstructive criticism
- Deconstruction reveals the arbitrariness of language most strikingly by exposing the contradictions in a discourse” (Lynn 112).
- Reader-response criticism coincides with the “poststructuralist view of the text as a site for a seemingly endless proliferation and subversion of meaning” (Payne 456).
- Unlike Reader-Response criticism, Poststructuralism does not assume “that all perception necessarily entails interpretation” (Payne 456).

Important Elements of Poststructuralism

- ▶ The **meaning** of a text is never stable because it is constantly changing
- ▶ **Words** only have meaning in relation to the other words around them. The text's structure changes when the reader refers to these other words.
- ▶ **Gaps** are created by contradictions and ambiguities within a text. Gaps creates an unstable meaning, and show the unity and division of a text.
- ▶ “**Blanks** refer to the suspended connectabilty in the text...”
(Iser 1679)

Iser's "Interaction Between Text and Reader"

- **Purpose of structure:** The structure of the literary text guides the reader's interpretation which is constantly being modified.
- Interpretation is a result of the dynamic interaction between the text and the reader. The combination of the two is what Iser calls the "virtual text." The virtual text lies between the artistic pole (the author's text) and the aesthetic pole (the reader's interpretation).
- **Interpersonal Experience** is the isolated experience we have of each other in our minds, but we cannot fully experience what others experience. Thus the **gaps** in are experiences are filled in by **dyadic interaction**.
- **Textual Experience** does not allow oral communication and exchange of ideas, meaning there is no dyadic interaction. Thus, there are ambiguous **gaps** between the reader and the text

- **Gaps and blanks are the most important elements of Post-Structuralism**
- **Convergence of Gaps:** The text-reader relationship alters when gaps between what is “concealed” and what is “revealed” are bridged.
- “**Blanks** leave open the connection between textual perspectives, and so spur the reader into coordinating these perspectives and patterns...they induce the reader to perform basic operations *within* the text” (Iser 1677).
- “**Negations**” invoke familiar knowledge and then cancel it out. The cancelled knowledge still “remains in view” as the reader modifies his or her interpretation.

Structural Qualities of Blanks:

1) “it makes possible the organization of a referential field” (Iser 1678).

- referential field: two related positions that influence each other; they organize a wandering viewpoint

2) The common framework for the segments in a referential field allows the reader to understand the affinities and differences that connect the segments together. The framework of these segments is a blank. The blank begins as an empty space in the reader’s perspective, but then allows the reader to produce a determinate interpretation. Thus, a blank has much control over the referential field of the wandering viewpoint.

3) The viewpoint switches and focuses on a theme. “The segment on which the viewpoint focuses in each particular moment becomes the theme. The theme of one moment becomes the background against which the next segment takes on its actuality, and so on. Whenever a segment becomes a theme, the previous one must lose its thematic relevance and be turned into a marginal, thematically vacant position, which can be and usually is occupied by the reader so that he may focus on the new thematic segment” (Iser 1679).

- Heart of Darkness example:

1) “Oh, I wasn’t touched. I was fascinated. It was as though a veil had been rent. I saw on that ivory face the expression of sombre pride, of ruthless power, of craven terror - of an intense and hopeless despair. Did he live his life again every detail of desire, temptation, and surrender during that supreme moment of complete knowledge? He cried in a whisper at some image, at some vision - he cried out twice, a cry that was no more than a breath:

- “The horror! The horror!” (Conrad 86).

Text

- 1) Referential field: Marlow's perception of Kurtz and the last words spoken by Kurtz are the two related positions that influence each other. The statements are related because they deal with the ambiguous representation of Kurtz's character.
- 2) The reader produces a determinate interpretation of the segments by looking at the **blank**: the reader's attempt to understand what kind of a man Kurtz was and how he was perceived by Marlow. Did Kurtz receive an epiphany in the end that allowed him to see his moral "deficiencies?" The first sentence indicates Marlow's uncertainty of whether Kurtz fully realized his mistakes, but the
- 3) How the viewpoint changes with the themes of proceeding sentences: the first and second sentences indicate that Marlow was not "touched" by Kurtz's failing health but was rather "fascinated" by it. In the next sentence Marlow says the words "ivory face" and "pride," which refer to the cruel side of Kurtz, but he also says "craven terror" and "hopeless despair" which depict Marlow's sympathy. By the next sentence, the focus of the viewpoint has changed from how Marlow perceives Kurtz to the question of whether Kurtz, himself, realizes the nature of what his actions have done. Then Kurtz utters his last words and focus of the viewpoint is entirely on a new subject: Kurtz's death.