

"The Role of Indeterminacy in the meaning of A Text in reference to Fish Reader-Response Theory: an analytical study"

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Abstract

This study tries to define mainly the concept "indeterminacy" from Stanley Fish point of views included in his theory called "reader-response". The indeterminacy in language and literature simply means non-fixed meaning of a text. However, such term should not be interpreted as there is no meaning at all but the meaning is there in the reader who is a member of an interpretive community. Indeterminacy is explained in reader-response theory which is a part of reader-response criticism, a school of criticism that focuses on the reader (or "audience") and his or her knowledge to obtain a meaning out of a literary work, in opposite to other traditional schools and theories that focus attention primarily on the author or the content and form of the work while the reader's role in re-creating literary work is ignored. The work of Fish can be divided into two kinds: one is phenomenological approach to reading which characterizes much of Fish's earlier work, and the other is an epistemological theory characteristic of Fish's later work. This research includes the essay entitled "Is There a Text in This Class?" because it contains the views of Fish regarding indeterminacy in his theory specially his later views.

This theory emphasizes the role of the reader who produces "real existence" to the work and completes its meaning through interpretation and not the text in itself. According to aforementioned theory and Fish the text is provided with meaning by a set of cultural assumptions, which often include authorial intent, though it is not limited to it. Moreover, as readers we interpret texts because we are part of an interpretive community that gives us a particular way of reading a text and finding its meaning. Then Fish claims that any attempt to discover the intent of the author is impossible as for Fish the author's intention is a creation of the reader who exclusively has such authority to determine upon the meaning of a text and the message of its author. There are schools just like formalism and new criticism have complete different views in opposition to the views of Fish. Such schools announced that the meaning of a text was embedded in the textual artifact or, as Wimsatt and Beardsley referred to it, "the object".

Section one

Introduction

This study deals mainly with indeterminacy in reader-response theory by Stanley Fish. This theory is a part of reader-response criticism, or in other words, It is a school of literary theory that focuses on the reader (or "audience") and his or her experience to obtain meaning of a literary work, in contrast to other schools and theories that focus attention primarily on the author or the content and form of the work and the reader's role in re-creating literary works is ignored.

Fish theory is a part of reader-response criticism which can be divided into two kinds: one is a phenomenological approach to reading which characterizes much of Fish's earlier work, and the other is an epistemological theory characteristic of his later work. This is reflected in his essays entitled *Is There a Text in This Class?* This research includes this essay because it contains the views of Fish regarding indeterminacy in his theory.

The center of this theory is the reader who produces "real existence" to the work and completes its meaning through interpretation and not the text in itself. Fish's theory states that a text does not have meaning outside of a set of cultural assumptions, which often include authorial intent, though it is not limited to it. Fish claims that we interpret texts because we are part of an interpretive community that gives us a particular way of reading a text. Then he says that any attempt to discover the intent of the author is impossible as for him the author's intention is a creation of the reader.

Such views stand as complete opposition to the views of the formalism and new criticism that held that meaning was embedded in the textual artifact or, as Wimsatt and Beardsley referred to it, "the object". What is indeterminacy, what could cause it, what are Fish's' opinions about it and how did he explain it and prove it are questions whose answers can be found in the following pages.

Section Two

2-1- the definition of Indeterminacy

In literature, indeterminacy can be observed when the ending of a story is not wrapped up entirely; there are still questions need to be answered. It includes when a text of a book is a result of a particular

culture and social background of the reader or when a language is such that the author's original intention is not known when the work is originally created. In other words, it is when any element of a text requires the reader to decide on its meaning. The text of a book being indeterminate does not mean that all meanings are of equal validity, however, it means that all meanings we draw from it are partial and provisional and that what we write about it is itself a text open to further interpretation. It may be also a principle of uncertainty invoked to deny the existence of any final or determinate meaning of a text. Because of their declined status, classical languages demonstrate an elevated sense of indeterminacy. (Leech 1969, p.56)

Indeterminacy theory states that all books may have the multiplicity of possible interpretations of a given textual elements, because the author's meaning or intent may not be clear, or the meaning may be distorted by a new culture. The term was given its literary meaning by the deconstructionists. Indeterminacy is similar to ambiguity as described by the new critics but it is applied by its practitioners not only to literature but also to interpretations of texts. (Grey 2008, p.149 and Ashish 2009, P.8)

In poetry, indeterminacy is caused by certain sources such as deviation, register and dialect, metaphor and simile, invisible meaning of words, intended speaker meaning, etc. An example can be given here is the poem written by T.S. Eliot 'Marina'. It can be interpreted into different levels such as: a- the religious experience, b- the journey of the life, c- the spiritual enlightenment of the poet, d- the faith or the hope of the speaker (and Eliot behind him) which is restored after finding his daughter. (Leech 1969, p.205,)

In linguistic indeterminacy is used to refer to a state of a certain affairs in linguistic study. In such affairs there is uncertainty on the part of the native speaker as to what is grammatical and acceptable. It poses a major difficulty in linguistic theories which attempt to define the limits of grammaticality. As linguistics branch, Pragmatics deals with this phenomenon. It explains that sentence like 'can you put *it there*' can only be interpreted if we know the context in which such sentence is uttered. Thus, indeterminate or indeterminacy remains an important aspect of both linguistics and literature. It is similar or additional to 'multiple significance' and 'indefinite significance'. Stanley Fish makes the idea of indeterminacy so clear in his theory which this study will discuss later on. (Wales 1986, p242)

2-2 Historical background about Stanley Fish

Stanley Eugene Fish, 1938, is an American literary critic and educator. He is presently dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences (and a

professor) at the University of Illinois, Chicago. As a young scholar, he wrote several books on 17th-century literature; the best known is *Surprised by Sin* (1967), a bold and influential study of Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Broad themes explored in this work were later expressed in *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (1980) and other works, in which he posited the reader-response theory, suggesting that readers use the value systems developed within their cultural milieus not to determine a text's meaning but to create it. He later became known as an agent provocateur and polemicist in the culture wars of the late 20th cent., attacking traditional ideological constructs in such books as *There's No Such Thing as Free Speech, and It's a Good Thing, Too* (1994) and *The Trouble with Principle* (1999). He returned to his earlier interests with *How Milton Works* (2001), a study of Milton's theology and method.

2-3-Reader-response criticism

It is worthwhile to have knowledge about reader-response criticism for better understanding of indeterminacy. It is a general term for those kinds of modern criticism and literary theory that focus on the responses of readers to literary works, rather than on the works themselves considered as self-contained entities. It does not designate any one critical theory. On the contrary, it donates a focus on the process of reading a literary text that is shared by many of the critical modes that have come into prominence since 1960. It is not a single agreed theory so much as a shared concern with a set of problems involving the extent and nature of readers' contribution to the meanings of literary works, approached from various positions including those of structuralism, psychoanalysis, phenomenology, and hermeneutics. The common factor is a shift from the description of texts in terms of their inherent properties to a discussion of the production of meanings within the reading process. Important contributions to this debate are made by Stanley Fish's in his essay entitled "Is There a Text in this Class?" (1980), which gives the reader an even more active role as the text's true producer. (Tompkins, 1980 and Ashish 2009)

Modern reader-response criticism began in the 1960s and '70s, particularly in America and Germany, in work by Norman Holland, Stanley Fish, Wolfgang Iser, Hans-Robert Jauss, and others. Important predecessors were I. A. Richards, who in 1929 analyzed a group of Cambridge undergraduates' misreading. This theory recognizes the reader as an active agent who imparts "real existence" to the work and completes its meaning through interpretation. Reader-response criticism argues that literature should be viewed as a performing art in which each reader creates his or her own, possibly unique, text-related performance. It

stands in total opposition to the theories of formalism and the New Criticism, in which the reader's role in re-creating literary works is ignored. New Criticism had emphasized that only that which is within a text is part of the meaning of a text. No appeal to the authority or intention of the author, nor to the psychology of the reader, was allowed in the discussions of orthodox New Critics. (Wales 1989, p.254)

In short, Reader-response critics turn from the traditional conception of a work as an achieved structure of meaning to the mental operation and responses as they read a text. By this shift, literary work is converted into activity of the reader. Thus, matters which had been considered by the traditional critics to be features of the work itself (e.g. the plot, characters, the narrator, etc.) are dissolved into an evolving process that include diverse kinds of expectations, violations, satisfactions, and deterrents in the flow of a reader's experience. Its critics agree that the meanings of a text are the "creation" or "production" of the individual "reader". Therefore, there is no one correct meaning for all readers.

Section Three

3-1-The Authority of Interpretive Communities as producer for indeterminacy

Fish begins by examining the relation between a reader and a text, arguing against the formalist belief that the text alone is the basic, knowable, neutral, unchanging component of literary experience, and has a fixed meaning. But in arguing for the right of the reader to interpret and in effect create the literary work, he skillfully avoids the old trap of subjectivity.

Interpretive communities are a theoretical concept stemming from reader-response criticism and invented by Stanley Fish. They appeared in an article by him in 1976 entitled "Interpreting the *Variorum*" (Text with notes by various scholars). His theory states that a text does not have meaning outside of a set of cultural assumptions regarding both what the characters mean and how they should be interpreted. This cultural context often includes authorial intent, though it is not limited to it. Fish claims that we interpret texts because we are part of an interpretive community that gives us a particular way of reading a text. Furthermore, he claims, we cannot know whether someone is a part of our interpretive community or not, that is, because we cannot escape our interpretive community, we can never really know its limits. The idea has been very influential in reader-response criticism, though it has also been very controversial. It is often interpreted as a relativistic standpoint that "words have no meaning," though what Fish means is quite the opposite, he is a royal advocate of his own readings of various texts. Rather, he means to point out that readings of a text are culturally constructed. (Wales 1989, p.256)

He believes that interpretive communities, like languages, are purely conventional, that is, arbitrarily agreed upon constructions. The way a community lives is in no way a reflection of some higher reality; it is rather a construction that has been erected by consensus. Fish's work in this field examines how the interpretation of a text is dependent upon each reader's own subjective experience in one or more communities, each of which is defined as a 'community' by a distinct epistemology.

So according to Fish, no meaning can be obtained outside the interpretive community to which the reader belongs and as such the indeterminacy arise. It should be noticed that Fish's work is developmental, not static. Fish at all times reveals the evolutionary aspect of his work--the manner in which he has assumed new positions, altered them, and then moved on. (Fish 1980)

3-2-In the depth of indeterminacy, the Reader-Response Theory of Stanley Fish

At this point it is worthwhile to take a closer look at Stanley Fish's reader-response theory. First is to examine Fish's literary theory and then to tie it in more broadly with the privatization of meaning and other phenomena occurring in philosophy and society. In other words, Fish's thesis is influenced by existential notions of truth and the rise of modernism/post-modernism.

There are really two kinds of reader-response criticism: one is a phenomenological approach to reading which characterizes much of Fish's earlier work, and the other is an epistemological theory characteristic of Fish's later work. The phenomenological method focuses on what happens in the reader's mind as he or she reads. Fish applies this method in his early work "Surprised by Sin: The Reader in *Paradise Lost*." His thesis in this work is that the supposed intent of Milton was to force the reader to see his own sinfulness in a new light and be forced back to God's grace. (Fish 1980)

Fish's concern at this point is with what "is really happening in the act of reading," and this is reflected in his compilations of essays entitled *Is There a Text in This Class?*, especially the first half. Fish defines his own phenomenological approach as "an analysis of the developing responses of the reader in relation to the words as they succeed one another in time. His concern is with what the text does as opposed to what it means. As J. F. Worthen suggests, much of his work can be seen as a reaction against the formalism that characterized the age of New Critical theory which held that meaning was embedded in the textual artifact or, as Wimsatt and

Beardsley referred to it, "the object". He suggests that, "The context for the discussion is the question of whether formal features exist prior to and independently of interpretive strategies. Fish eventually offers a negative response to this question, similarly, he also answering "No" to the question, "Is there a text in this class?".(Firmat 1984)

From this point in Fish's career his theories evolve into a form of criticism that rejects the author's intentionality and places meaning solely within the arena of those receiving the text. Thus his theory is sometimes called "reception aesthetics" or "affective stylistics." Fish claims that it is the interpretive community that creates its own reality. It is the community that invests a text with meaning. Those who claim that meaning is to be found in some eternal superstructure or substructure of reality he labels "foundationalists." His theory is epistemological in that it deals not so much with literary criticism as with how one comes to know. In the following analysis of Fish's theory, the focus is primarily on his later reader-response theory.

3-3-Meaning in the Reader

This aspect of Fish's theory is one of the most radical and controversial. There is a clear reference made by him to the indeterminacy of the meaning of a text. He posits that meaning inheres not in the text but in the reader, or rather the reading community. "In the procedures I would urge", he writes, "the reader's activities are at the center of attention, where they are regarded not as leading to meaning but as *having* meaning. He can hold this because he believes that there is no stable basis for meaning. There is no correct interpretation that will always hold true. Meaning does not exist "out there" somewhere. It exists, rather, within the reader.

In his earlier work he made a claim that what a text means is the experience that it produces in the reader. To define meaning he says, "It is an experience; it occurs; it does something; it makes us do something. Indeed, I would go so far as to say, in direct contradiction of Wimsatt and Beardsley, that what it does is what it means. Here Fish sets himself against the formalist principles of the past with its supposed scientific agenda. (Veeseer 2000)

Fish's next move in his anti-formalist agenda is to deny the text as object, which was so important to Wimsatt and Beardsley and the New Critics. "The objectivity of the text is an illusion and, moreover, a dangerous illusion, because it is so physically convincing. What exactly Fish means by this statement is somewhat unclear. He does not deny the existence of the concern object, although one could argue that this is exactly what this sentence by itself means because he apparently pairs the

word "objective" with "physical. It is the context that illuminates what he is driving at. But he does deny the text's independence as a repository of meaning. The text does not contain meaning: despite being written upon a blank slate onto which the reader, in reading, actually writes the text.

Fish claims that an interpretive theory is itself circular; that the interpreter will always find what he is looking for in the text, that formal patterns "are themselves constituted by an interpretive act. He claims at one point that: theories always work and they will always produce exactly the results they predict, results that will be immediately compelling to those for whom the theory's assumptions and enabling principles are self-evident. Indeed, the trick would be to find a theory that didn't work.

For Fish, "success is inevitable". The methods with which one approaches the text have already determined the outcome; one's presuppositions actuate the product. For him, the text contains nothing in itself; rather the content is supplied by the reader. It is the reader that determines the shape of text, its form, and its content. This is how Fish can claim that a reader writes texts. Worthen's comment is apt that for Fish the text can only function as a mirror that provides a reflection of its reader. (Ashish 2009)

3-4--How the Authorial Intent could lead to indeterminacy

Although Fish argues that the only possible meaning of a text is what the author intends, he claims that Any attempt to determine what exactly the author intended will result in nothing more than an interpretation based upon the interpretive community of the reader making the interpretation. Fish distinguishes the former as an epistemological point about what texts mean, whereas the latter is a sociological one that characterizes much of Fish's earlier work. It focuses on what happens in the reader's mind as he or she reads. This is reflected in his compilations of essays entitled '*Is There a Text in This Class?*', especially the first half. His concern is with what the text does as opposed to what it means. (Geoffrey and Short 1981)

It is in this same manner that Fish dismisses the idea of authorial intent as the guiding principle in interpretation. In analyzing one of his previous critical works he declares,

I did what critics always do: I "saw" what my interpretive principles permitted or directed me to see, and then I turned around and attributed what I had 'seen' to a text and an intention. . . . What I am suggesting is that formal units are always a function of the interpretive model one brings to

bear; they are not "in" the text, and I would make the same argument for intentions. (Fish 1980)

To claim that the author intended to say or do such and such is really a declaration regarding the interpreter, in Fish's theory. Thus different interpreters will see different intentions because they are a creation of the reader and not the author. As with New Critical theory, the author fails to live past the creation of the text, indeed, for Fish the author's intention is a creation of the reader.

3-5-Fish's essay " *Is there a text in this class*" as proof of indeterminacy

This essay is an answer to the charges of the grammarians like Abram and Herish who believed that the utterances have a verbal meaning or there is a fixed meaning.

On the first day of the semester, one of his girl student went to one of his colleague and asked "Is *there a text in this class*?" His colleague answered confidently: - "yes. It is the Norton Anthology of literature. But the girl does not want to know that, so, she said:-" No, no, I mean in this class do we believe in poems and things or it just us?" This explanation helped the teacher to learn that the girl wanted to know if bringing a text in the class is necessary on the very day of the semester. (Firmat 1984)

This anecdote suggests that no text has a determinate meaning and that the meaning of the text is not stable. This question has two literal meaning and more other implied meanings. The first one is " if there is a particular text prescribed to this concerning course? His colleague got this meaning as of the academic Situation and the context in which it was asked. The second meaning of the question is about the instructor's position on the status of the text. This is an institutional meaning. His colleague got it when the girl student reshaped her question. Fish adds that in the absence of educational context, one could arrive at other meaning such as " I forget my text box in the class, have you seen it?"

Fish then objects the views of the grammarians Like Abram and Herish. They argue that utterances have verbal meanings and the speakers do not face any difficulty in decoding the message in it. The example given by the grammarians is "the air is crisp". They expect that the readers to agree with them that the sentence has only one linguistic meaning "the air is fresh". But Fish says that if sentence used in discussion about music, this sentence will be a fine comment on the performance of a musical instrument. Thus, it is true that it is impossible to think of a sentence independent of a context. When no context is given, the meaning is got in the context in which it is mostly used. (Turner 1973, P.134, 237)

Fish further says that he told the anecdote to several speakers of the language. Most of them could not arrive at the second meaning; however, few persons got it because it comes from Stanley Fish. His colleague also got the second meaning as he knows that the girl is student of Fish, otherwise, he would have arrived at the meaning after a long route.

Fish expects two charges from the critics against him. One of them is that he sophisticated relativist. He refutes the charge by saying that there is no individual can go away from his/her own assumption and beliefs.

The other expected charge against Fish would be that he is solipsist. The critics argue that the shared intelligibility is impossible. Fish refute this charge cleverly. He asserts that the individual's assumptions are not his own but belong to the society and circumstances in which he brought up. For example the colleague of Fish is brought up in the American educational system. The assumptions link the student and the colleague, and their communication, thus becomes successful because of their shared understanding. (Asish 2009, p.62)

Fish has wisely and boldly expressed his views on the importance of the readers in order to get the meaning of a text. His views are enough to show his interest in the reader-response Theory.

Section Four

Conclusion

As a prominent and respected literary theorist, Fish emphasized on indeterminacy as the reader is the person who decides on the meaning of a given text. Fish's work in this field examines how the interpretation of a text is dependent upon each reader's own subjective experience in one or more communities, each of which is defined as a 'community' or "reading community" by a distinct epistemology. No fixed meaning exist in any text.

Fish is an active practitioner of reader-response criticism which turn the concern from the traditional conception of a work as an achieved structure of meaning to the mental operation and responses of the readers reading a text.

Although Fish argues that the only possible meaning of a text is what the author intends, he claims that any actual attempt to access this is not possible or determinate. Any attempt to determine what exactly the author intended will result in nothing more than an interpretation based upon the interpretive community of the reader making the interpretation. Fish distinguishes the former as an epistemological point about what texts mean, whereas the latter is a sociological one about how claims about those meanings are produced.

In his theory and through his essay, Fish explained how there is no fixed meaning or determinate meaning. There is always indeterminacy of meaning whether in linguistic or literary text. Here he does not mean that there is no meaning at all but the meaning of a text is determined by the reader or the reading community; based upon the context to which a text belongs and the community norms where the reader brought up. The meaning reached by one reader could be different from one reached by other, particularly, if they do not share the same context or community. The meaning is unreachable outside the context. Only community norms are useful to obtain the meaning.

The author's or the writer's intent, the absence of the context, the focus on fixed norms, the absence of reader, separately or collectively, are the sources of indeterminacy. So, Fish eventually Offers a negative response to the question "whether formal features exist prior to and independently of interpretive strategies". Similarly, he also answering "No" to the question, "Is there a text in this class?"

To sum up, the term indeterminacy has an important role both in linguistics and literature. It is inseparable segment of the language. It refutes the assumption that there is a fixed meaning. This was established by Stanley Fish. However, such term should not be interpreted as there is no meaning at all but the meaning is there in the reader who is member of an interpretive community.

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الخلاصة

تتناول هذه الدراسة بشكل أساسي مفهوم " اللاتحديد" استناداً الى آراء ونظريات عالم اللغة ستانلي فش المتضمنة في نظريته التي تحمل عنوان " نظرية استجابة القارئ". بعبارة مبسطة أن مفهوم اللاتحديد في مجال الادب واللغة يعني عدم جود معنى واحد وثابت لأي نص.الى انه لايجب ان يفهم من هذه العبارة بغياب المعنى عن أي نص بل أن المعنى موجود وإن القارئ الذي ينتمي الى مجتمع تسوده أساليب تفسيرية معينة هو أو هي من يحدد ويقرر هذا المعنى . تم ايضاح هذا المفهوم من قبل نظرية استجابة القارئ والتي هي جزء من مدرسة نقدية تحمل نفس الاسم والتي تركز على دور القارئ وخبرته أو معرفته في أيجاد معنى أي نص . أن هذه المدرسة لا تتفق مع آراء مدارس ونظريات أخرى والتي تركز على أهمية المؤلف والمحتوى و شكلية النص بينما أهمل دور القارئ في التوصل الى معنى لهذا النص .

تقسم أعمال ستانلي فـش الى نوعين : الأولى والتي تعرف باستنادها الى النظرية أو الطريقة السياقية وهي ما ميزت الاعمال الاولى له والأخرى تعرف بالطريقة أو النظرية المعرفية حيث أن الاعمال الاخيرة لستانلي فـش قد حملت بصمة هذه النظرية ويمكن التعرف عليها في المقالة الذي كتبها ستانلي فـش وتتضمن اراءه بعنوان " هل يوجد نص في هذا الصنف؟" حيث تناولت هذه الدراسة هذه المقالة .

أن نظرية ستانلي فـش تؤكد على دور القارئ وتعتبره المنتج الحقيقي لوجود النص والمكمل الاساسي لمعناه من خلال عملية قيام القارئ بتفسير النص وان المعنى لا يوجد في النص بحد ذاته. بناءً على نظرية ستانلي فـش أنفة الذكر فإن النص يأخذ معناه من مفاهيم ذات عمق ثقافي وأن المعنى الذي يقصده الكاتب أو المؤلف موجودة في هذه المفاهيم ولا يقتصر على عليها. أن كل قارئ هو جزء من مجتمع تسوده مفاهيم تفسيرية تزود هذا القارئ بطريقة معينة لقراءة النص ومن ثم التوصل الى معناه . طبقاً الى آراء ستانلي فـش فإن اي محاولة لاجاد معنى الكاتب بعيداً وبمعزل عن القارى هي محاولة مستحيلة حيث يعتبر ستانلي فـش القارى هو الشخص الوحيد المؤهل لاجاد معنى النص والرسالة التي يبعثها كاتب النص.

أن المدارس الاخرى كالشكلية والنقد الحديث لا تتفق مع وتعارض آراء وأفكار ستانلي فـش حيث أنها تقر بوجود المعنى في حرفة كتابة النص أو ما يدعوه وسمات ويرادلي ب "الموضوع"