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## INTERPRETING LITERATURE IN THE CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHICAL AND HUMANITARIAN PARADIGM

## ИНТЕРПРЕТАЦИЯ ЛИТЕРАТУРЫ В СОВРЕМЕННОЙ ФИЛОСОФСКОЙ И ГУМАНИТАРНОЙ ПАРАДИГМЕ

This article examines the main trends in literary criticism that emerged under the influence of philosophical and humanitarian thought at the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century. Using examples from modern and classical literature, the authors examine controversial issues that are relevant to modern literary criticism: the definition of literature as a subject of study and analysis, the problem of ambiguity of meaning and multiple interpretations, a new understanding of the role of the author and reader, the importance of the social and cultural context in understanding literature. Based on the presented examples and references, the authors propose a systematic approach for navigation in the modern multi-paradigmatic literary landscape.

*Key words: literary criticism; deconstruction; interpretation; "death" of the author; simulacrum.*

В данной статье рассматриваются основные тенденции в литературной критике, сложившиеся под влиянием философской и гуманитарной мысли в конце XX – начале XXI века. Используя примеры из современной и классической литературы, авторы обсуждают противоречивые вопросы, актуальные для современного литературоведения: определение литературы как предмета изучения и анализа, проблема неоднозначности смысла и множественности интерпретаций, осмысление роли автора и читателя, значение социального и культурного контекста для понимания литературного произведения. На основании приведенных примеров предлагается системный подход для ориентации в современном полипарадигмальном литературном ландшафте.

*Ключевые слова: литературная критика; деконструкция; интерпретация; «смерть» автора; симулякр.*

Under the influence of the philosophical ideas of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which provoked the development of numerous trends and approaches to understanding a written text and opened up new horizons for both inexperienced readers and professional literary critics, interpreting literature has become more interesting than ever. As a result, instead of getting closer to a clearer vision of the functions and aims of literary analysis, we now witness how the trends are growing towards diversity of interpretations and multi-paradigmatic tendencies, which incorporate linguistic, literary, philosophical and communicative research.

The purpose of this article is to outline a range of problematic literary issues that have arisen so far and to consider perspectives for literary interpretation. To achieve this goal, we have singled out several key questions to which scholars have been struggling for many years to find consistent answers. The variability of possible answers to these questions is only multiplying, taking into consideration the co-existence of the new philosophical trends with those that turned out to be quite tenacious and therefore are still relevant today. These are the questions about the definition of literature in the modern philosophically predetermined literary landscape, about literature's relation to the world, about the necessity of meaning (message) behind the words and finally about the tendency towards different, often irreconcilable interpretations. We suggest that going back to the roots of modern philosophical and linguistic thinking might explain why the definite answers to the above-stated questions are still not at our disposal, and we propose to approach these issues from a multi-paradigmatic humanitarian perspective.

The first question is concerned with the controversy about the definition of literature. ***What is literature and what makes it different from non-literature?*** Terry Eagleton in *Literary Theory: An Introduction* points out the intricacies of the traditional understanding of literature as something fictional (that is, not true) and non-pragmatic (based on specific literary language characterized by imagery). The author states that we can read George Orwell's essays about the Spanish Civil War as literature because we can generalize what Orwell says about the civil war to "the cosmic utterance about human life" [1, p. 7]. According to T. Eagleton, "some texts are born literary, some achieve literariness, and some have literariness thrust upon them" [Ibid, p. 8], paraphrasing a famous phrase from Shakespeare.

The most interesting example of how a written product can have different literary value depending on the people's attitude is the history of modern literary criticism of *Beowulf*. For a long time *Beowulf* was not

studied as a piece of literature but only as a historical document that could throw light on a lot of facts and ideas referring to the Old English period. The poem survived in a single copy in the manuscript known as the Nowell Codex. It was discovered in a private collection of medieval manuscripts only at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, though the manuscript itself dates back to the 10<sup>th</sup> century. So, the first translations into modern English appeared at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and caught the attention of historians interested in the history of the Middle Ages and linguists who focused on the aspects connected with the development of the English language. As the majority of scholars agreed that the characters of *Beowulf* such as King Hrothgar and the Scyldings were based on historical people from the 6<sup>th</sup>-century Scandinavia, for more than a century *Beowulf* was used as a source of information about Scandinavian and Germanic figures. Archeologists were also involved as they confirmed many elements of the *Beowulf* story [2, p. 17]. Anyway, though the story abounds in fictional and mythical characters such as the monster Grendel, Grendel's mother and the dragon, with whom Beowulf fights his final mortal battle, there were few attempts from the side of literary critics to include this piece of writing into the sphere of their interests. It was J. R. R. Tolkien, Professor of Anglo-Saxon at the University of Oxford, who emphasized the literary value of Beowulf in his 1936 seminal essay *Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*.

It seems that an important criterion that matters for the definition of literature is how people treat a given piece of writing at a particular period. This may sound preposterous but our understanding of literature as well as other forms of art is constantly being redefined depending on the changes in value guidelines, social structure, political and economic events. It is not surprising that appreciation of artistic output also changes in different historical periods. Although there are many criteria of what makes a text to be a literary/fictional text [3], how people treat a given piece of writing at a particular period may be one of such criteria. Even within a lifespan of one generation, it is possible to observe how differently critics can treat literary texts depending on the changing values and attitudes. Let us take the example of *The Karamazov Brothers* by F. M. Dostoevsky. Soviet literary critics, complying with the socialist ideological agenda, insisted that F.M. Dostoevsky was misguided in his understanding of socialism as antithetical to Christianity and condemned the writer's shortsightedness and inability to understand the infallibility of socialist ideals: "unable to understand the acute contradictions that surrounded him, Dostoevsky declared that the weakening of the moral foundations of society was allegedly caused by the growing influence

of atheism and socialism” [4, c. 514]. However, after the collapse of the USSR, it became visible how limited and shortsighted the official understanding of the Russian writer’s heritage was; it no longer corresponded to the changed mentality of the ex-Soviet people.

Moreover, the way information is consumed has drastically changed due to the arrival of the internet, and we have just witnessed the metaphorical death of the printed press and embraced the diversity of media resources based on user-generated content, which makes the names of popular bloggers and social media influencers more important than the names of once revered writers. Who knows what people will call literature tomorrow? Can a text generated by ChatGPT, which has all the formal characteristics of fiction, be called literature? There is an obvious definitional controversy that has to be tackled sooner or later. As Terry Eagleton concludes, “Any belief that the study of literature is the study of a stable, well-definable entity, as entomology is the study of insects, can be abandoned is chimera” [1, p. 8].

Logically, there arises another question for reconsideration: ***what is literature’s relation to the world by which it is surrounded?*** Indeed, how does literature consider its historical, social, political, or cultural environment? This is the point where we have to admit that literature doesn’t exist as a *thing-in-itself*, it is closely connected with sociocultural and philosophical tendencies that prevail in a certain historical period. Literature absorbs the atmosphere of the time, the mood of the people who live in this period, their mode of thinking and their values, previous experience and knowledge, digests and, afterwards, transforms all the above-mentioned into discourse. History of literary studies can provide quite a great number of curious and confusing literary transformations of reality into fiction. One of the trickiest examples is the life of the 15<sup>th</sup>-century marshal of France Gilles de Rais, whose name is associated with the story of Bluebeard, a fictional character who killed his numerous wives. De Rais was an extremely wealthy man successfully married to a rich heiress, but then he was accused of having tortured and murdered numerous children, sentenced to death by the ecclesiastical court, though even his contemporaries pointed out numerous irregularities of the proceedings and the duke of Brittany’s financial interest in de Rais’s ruin [5]. The question why de Rais came to be regarded as a prototype of a fictitious murderous husband has been subject to literary, historical and cultural debate for years.

Another issue connected with literature’s relation to the world is that the world around us is constantly changing while literary fictional heritage, once created, remains static. For example, one of the most obvious

and interesting points for discussion of George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* is the analysis of the intertextual connections between G. B. Shaw's play and the Roman poet Ovid's narrative poem called *Metamorphoses*, in which Pygmalion was a sculptor who fell in love with the statue he created. Understanding cross-cultural references and drawing parallels between the literary works written in completely different historical periods gives an opportunity to go further and track the traces of the basic Pygmalion story in William Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* and even in the story of Pinocchio, in which a wooden puppet was transformed into a real boy. Nowadays many people might be confused by these intertextual references because modern European cultural contexts are far from Greek mythology and the name of Ovid may not ring a bell even to advanced readers.

Another curious cultural "metamorphosis" can be mentioned in connection with the film *My Fair Lady* based on Shaw's *Pygmalion*. It is important to mention that, though the play by B. Shaw was focused on criticism of the class society in Britain, the American filmmakers practically abandoned the social realism of the original play and interpreted it as a romantic light-hearted comedy, which might be explained purely by a higher commercial potential of romance over drama. Here, we would like to share the experience of teaching Sociocultural Aspects of Speech Communication to the third-year MSLU students, where we discuss accents and variants of the English language and the students are invited to optionally watch *My Fair Lady*. It is interesting that those who rise to the challenge of watching the film often express the opinion that they did not understand what was funny and romantic about it. The film once made as a romantic musical is now viewed as "a toxic relationship between an abuser and a codependent victim", which resonates quite well with today's psychologically savvy GenZers.

It turns out that mass audience doesn't seem to find pleasure in reconstructing the cultural and historical contexts and intertextual references of the past, because figuratively speaking so much water has flown under the bridge that it's more challenging to deconstruct the existing texts from the perspectives relevant to modernity. No wonder that the philosophical idea of deconstruction introduced by Jacques Derrida, the outstanding French philosopher of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, turned out to be extremely useful and relevant for literary studies.

In his work *Of Grammatology* J. Derrida considers the relationship between speech, language and reality, pointing at a definitional logical fallacy that influenced the perception of written texts in the modern European frame of thinking rooted in ancient Greek philosophy that

“restricted writing to the model of phonetic script and the language of words” [6, p. 32]. First, the author recalls the Aristotelian definition “Spoken words are the symbols of mental experience and written words are the symbols of spoken words” and points out that F. de Saussure doesn’t go beyond this definition: “Language and writing are two distinct systems of signs; the second exists for the sole purpose of representing the first” [Ibid, p. 34]. J. Derrida claims that the whole premises that lie at the core of modern philosophy are wrong as they view written language as a poor relative of speech, a sign of a sign, a symbol of a symbol.

Eventually J. Derrida refers to the works of different philosophers from Plato to Hegel and Rousseau, saying that what their philosophical entrances have in common is the idea of logocentrism (Saussure’s phonocentrism), a philosophical assumption that introduces the motif of metaphysical presence that is supposed to be primary to everything else. Thus, spoken words will be the symbols of this presence and written languages will be the symbols of spoken words. According to Saussure, writing is a system of signs that exists for the sole purpose of representing spoken language, which is a system of signs reflecting a referent (metaphysical reality) [Ibid, p. 23]. In this context, the function of reading is limited only to a doubling of the written text. In literature, philosophical logocentrism finds its reflection in traditional literary criticism based on the clarification of the historical context to extract the author’s messages.

But J. Derrida opposes to this system and claims that the only way to open up the meaning of language is the understanding of writing as the disappearance of natural presence [Ibid, p. 150]. The point is that reading as a process produces meaning of words outside of writing in general, which means that the existence of the referent is actually not important. *Il n’y a pas de hors-texte*, J. Derrida concludes. As far as we can interpret this famous quote, J. Derrida insists that in the process of writing, the metaphysical reality disappears, and there is nothing outside the text [Ibid, p. 160]. Therefore, the process of reading is not a doubling of the text, but a deconstruction of the text, a production of a new meaningful structure.

Consequently, J. Derrida’s concept of deconstruction opened doors to new literary criticism in first turn, because it served as a method of literary analysis that could break traditional patterns of analysis and encouraged multiple interpretations of classical literature from new perspectives [7, p. 35]. Writers, who started to challenge the traditional approaches to literature, redefine literary structural elements and reconsider traditional rules of writing, also embraced deconstruction. The tendency towards genre

experimentation has led to completely new challenging approaches to plot structure and narration and resulted in the hypertextual practices that have gone literally beyond the frames of language by referring to different forms of art, incorporating graphic elements and mixing up literary styles [8, c. 75].

In today's literature, an inquisitive reader can experience interesting and unusual encounters. For example, although it would be perfectly all right to analyze Jamaica Kincaid's short story *Girl* (1978) [9, c. 71] in the "traditional" way, concentrating, for instance, on the narrative voice, a literary critic will not be able to find such traditional plot elements as exposition or denouement. Even the climax is under the question, which makes this story almost unplotted. Nevertheless, this is a wonderful sample of emotional character-driven short fiction, which is extremely challenging for cultural and gender literary analysis. So, the answer to the above-stated question about literature's relation to the world is ambiguous and indefinite, because on the one hand, literature is a reflection of the world around us as it keeps in tune with the subtleties of cultural, political, economic and social life and shows them through the prism of the author's perspective. On the other hand, literature is devoid of metaphysical reality as in the process of writing natural presence disappears and a new meaning is produced in the process of reading, which is out of the author's control. Could J. K. Rowling foresee the fanfic response to her writing with numerous fan-made stories with original plots including fantasies about Harry Potter's homosexual relationships with the other characters? As Roland Barthes puts it in his essay *The Death of the Author*: "As soon as a fact is narrated ... the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death, writing begins" [10].

The next question worth considering is ***Why is it that literary texts provoke a great number of different, often irreconcilable interpretations?*** In traditional literary studies readers are doomed to the search for the only possible interpretation and are confused by multiple attempts to decipher the author's messages looking up to literary critics who are qualified to deliver the messages of the author. Quoting R. Barthes, we have to admit, "Historically, the reign of the Author has also been that of the Critic" [Ibid]. However, what has happened in contemporary literary criticism is the redefinition of text as a philosophical entity: "...a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author God) but a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash" [Ibid]. Once the "divine" presence of authors and their legitimate interpreters – critics has been "exorcised" from the text, it must be admitted that since the author is "dead", there are as many interpretations of a text's meaning as

there are readers. We can't but paraphrase Friedrich Nietzsche's "facts are not facts until they have been interpreted" – texts are not texts until they have been interpreted.

However, modern social practices prioritizing political correctness and inclusivity have gone further than including the reader into communication via literary texts. Today's readers have become co-creators of texts, feeling at liberty to incorporate their own verbal messages in the process of their individual interpretation. Not long ago the Guardian informed us about the politically correct rewriting of Roald Dahl's children's books in order to remove language deemed offensive. Edits have been made to descriptions of characters' physical appearances. The word "fat" has been cut from every new edition of relevant books, while the word "ugly" has also been culled, the Guardian says [11]. Augustus Gloop from *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* is not "fat" but "enormous". Mrs. Twit from *The Twits* is not "ugly and beastly" but "beastly". The interference into the author's verbal domain not on the level of interpretation, but on the level of written word can be discussed endlessly. The advocates of this endeavor say that it's all for the sake of continuity and maintaining popularity of the books among modern children who are being brought up in a completely different cultural environment. It means that readers interpret books from the point of view of their cultural and social context and readapt texts to make them more digestible for themselves. Would Roald Dahl, who is literally dead, call it progressive if he were still alive?

There is one more question that has to be asked and that is ***How can we guarantee that a text does not mean just anything or nothing at all?*** When Noam Chomsky wanted to demonstrate the difference between the notions of grammatical correctness and sense-making he made up a sentence "Colourless green ideas sleep furiously" to emphasise the importance of meaningful language structures [12, p. 418]. In other words, it's not enough for a language to be grammatically correct to express meaning. So, how can we make sure that we are interpreting something meaningful, but not "colourless green ideas" or "the iggle squiggs"?

In semiotics, a sign is defined as anything that communicates a meaning that can be either intentional or unintentional. In Ursula K. Le Guin's story called *Texts* the main character Joanna begins to see text messages in the foam of the waves on the shore. She can read "Jason plus Karen" in the curved shapes of the sea foam on the sand, combined with dates and initials, and then she wonders whether the dates represent the length of time these people lived together or the lifespan of their child. Joanna buys a lace collar



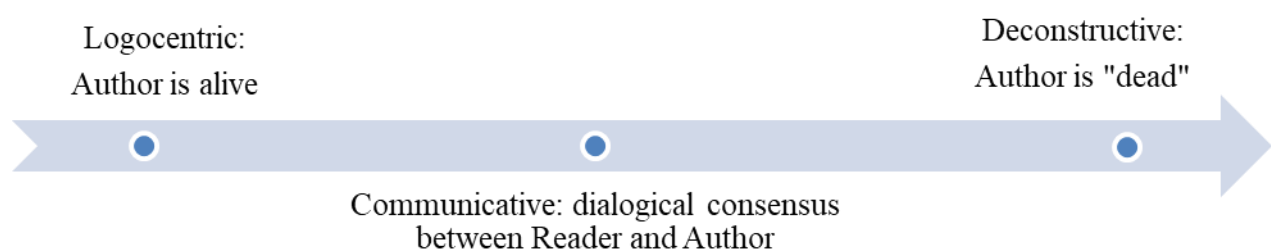
at a second-hand store and very clearly reads the lace pattern, on which she sees the following: “My soul must go”, and begins to think about how and what she should do after that [13, c. 91].

Unintentional meaning is also a meaning by definition. The problem is that our fundamental knowledge about language and its functions connected with meaningful delivery of information is being reconsidered at the background of the social media advent [14, c. 207]. As Jean Baudrillard formulated it, “We live in a world where there is more and more information and less and less meaning” [15, c. 32]. J. Derrida’s criticism of logocentrism and his idea about the necessity to free written language from the burden of metaphysical reality got its logical development in J. Baudrillard’s concept of simulacrum. If we accept the idea that language doesn’t reflect reality, we have to go further and admit that language has an ability to create a reality of its own. Simulacrum is not just a symbol of something that can be described as presence; it is something that simulates (stages) reality, which is created by naming something that doesn’t exist: “Rather than creating communication, it (mass media information) exhausts itself in the act of staging communication. Rather than producing the meaning, it exhausts itself in the staging of meaning. The hyperreality of communication and of meaning...” [Ibid, c. 35]. In his essay *The Gulf War did not Take Place* J. Baudrillard discusses the problem of information delivered via the mass media, pointing out that readership never had a chance to observe what was really happening during the Gulf War [16, p. 21]. The whole media coverage was based on scattered disconnected video footage which was mostly broadcast from the newsroom and verbal commentary that created a simulacrum, a reality without any verifiable connection with what can be called a metaphysical presence. Would we call it fiction if it were not broadcast in the media?

So, on the one hand, a particular meaning emerges in the process of interpretation. On the other hand, intentional manipulative meanings can be disguised as simulacra, that’s why nowadays educated people keep talking about media literacy and critical thinking skills that can help us discern truth from fiction. What does it have to do with literary studies? Contemporary philosophical speculations about hyperreality, the changing role of language, new approaches to understanding and interpreting meanings, the influence of AI on human identity – all these premises have stimulated new themes and ideas in literature. The recent example is the 2016 novel *Hot Skull* by the Turkish writer Afsin Kum made into a dystopian series on Netflix about the pandemic of communication, where people are infected with talking nonsense. The infected people called jabberers spread virus via jabber, which echoes with Chomsky’s “colourless ideas” and media information deprived of actual meaning.

As seen from these examples, the most important issues that lie at the core of literary studies – the questions connected with our understanding of literature as a form of art, the relationship between literary texts and the changing world around them, the correlation between the meaning of the written text and its interpretations – have been influenced by new approaches in philosophy, linguistics and communication theory. We have stated that the search for the answers is problematic and not definite that is why modern literary landscape is shaped by numerous literary approaches which allow multiple interpretations of literary texts. This diversity of critical approaches is thoroughly summarized in different manuals and books, for example, in *Contemporary Interpretation Strategies* where the authors provide a round up of the existing critical approaches, starting with Formalism, Structuralism, Social, Ethnic and Feminist interpretation strategies and up to Deconstruction, Poststructuralism and Reader-Response Criticism [17, c. 3].

The reflection of the underlying philosophical theories introduced by J. Derrida, R. Barthes and other philosophers and linguists is leading us to the idea that a systematic navigation through the literary approaches to text interpretation revolve around the reader's/critic's choice. We assume that each literary theory can find its place on the progressive line, depending on the degree to which the reader chooses to get rid of the author's influence. On the one extreme, we can submit to the author's dominance and read the text with the aim of reconstruction of the original thoughts and ideas implied by the author. After all, in his *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* Umberto Eco claims that the author communicates certain messages and expects the reader to decode them: "You can not use the text as you want, but only as the text wants you to use it. An open text, however open it be, cannot afford whatever interpretation" [18, c. 4]. On the other extreme, we can metaphorically "kill" the author and treat the text as a self-sufficient entity, which results in interpretative self-reflection through the prism of one's own values and assumptions (it is important to mention that deconstruction here is understood in a wider sense of the word, not as a specific literary method, but as a conceptual phenomenon). As a matter of choice, we can also start a dialogue with the author by responding to the author's ideas (see picture).



Our standpoint is that the existing critical approaches could be classified as falling under one of the following critical tendencies depending on the reader's intentions to dig out for the author's messages: 1) logocentric (reconstructive), 2) self-reflective (deconstructive), 3) communicative (dialogical).

The logocentric tendency is rooted in the idea of philosophical logocentrism, which relies on the Aristotelian understanding of written texts as symbols of spoken speech. Alternatively, the deconstructive tendency is based on J. Derrida's idea of reading as a productive process in which the reader creates new meanings that are out of the author's control, thus are closer to the reader's self-reflection rather than pure text analysis. The communicative tendency represents reading as an attempt to find dialogical consensus. It is an interactive process, where meaning evolves out of interaction among the author, the text and the reader.

We believe that the perspectives for the development of literary interpretation lie in the unification and search for common grounds for classification and systematization of the diversity of literary approaches, which requires knowledge and deep understanding of the philosophical thought of the past as well as the existing humanitarian multi-paradigmatic tendencies of the present.

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