In Search for the Lost Connection: Hierarchical Tensions as a Unified Way of Deriving Meaning

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Abstract: The current study challenges the well-established close reading approach to teaching American literature. To establish the initial framework for analysis, a brief account of the role of the author in literary theory is given (Gadamer's and Iser's hermeneutics, Formalists, New Critics, and Post-Modernists). Thereafter, using the example of Teju Cole's *Open City*, it is shown that the meaning of the work could be derived from building connections instead of assigning eclectic meaning to the eclectic fragments of the text. The offered approach both proves useful while teaching non-linear works of fiction and offers students an insight into authenticity of author's work through its self-reflexivity.

Keywords: Literary Theory, *Open City*, Post-Modernism, Authenticity

1. Introduction

Since the middle of the 15th century, the Pope was not trusted with interpreting the Bible for everyone else, and people started not only to look for the meaning of the only literature which everybody's life depended upon - the biblical one, but also make up their own (Luther, 1517; Pope Leo X, 1520). After the era of hermeneutics, however, words were not trusted with carrying the function of meaning anymore, and the definition of meaning expanded to encompass the form and the very act of reading. Thus, certain works of literature emerged which emphasized form over words as a means of expression. Looking at any work of literary merit which was written in the post-modern/ post-structuralist world, the most important aspect is exploring the structural patterns within the book. Teju Cole, being a postmodern author, exemplifies what is deriving meaning from structure. In Teju Cole's *Open City* (2012), the central meaning lies not within the plot and impact of its interpretation on the reader but instead within the struggle which is represented through the act of reading itself.

1.1 Hermeneutics and Initial Views on the Role of the Author

The first question which one needs to pose while analyzing a postmodern work is the question of the author: does the author and their intent matter? When Gadamer and Iser came forward with their view of hermeneutics, the author was given unique deference and agency (Gadamer, 1975; Iser, 1978). Gadamer was definite that the reader needs to be open to being told something true by someone else which did undermine the authority of the reader. Iser argued, undermining the reader equally much, that the reader needs, in advance, to know the exact meaning of the (author) because that's the only way to honor the otherness of the (author) (Fry, 2010). Why the reader needed to honor some remote person remains a secret, or, rather, a rhetorical question. It has always been the reader's task to decipher what the author wanted to say. Literary critics argued that the latter had the ultimate control over the meaning of the work

(Belinsky et al. 1976). However, given that the author cannot be omniscient about the personality and background of any given reader, or, for that matter, of all readers, they, therefore, cannot control the interpretation and reader's take on the work. The literature needed a new approach to respond to the question of the author.

Literary theory, namely New Criticism, attempted to resolve the question by expanding the very notion of "meaning" by dividing it into two parts. The first meaning is created by the author and the second meaning, which is subordinate to the first one, is the reader's addition to the main, the author's one. To adapt the obsolete and confining view of the all-powerful author, Wimsatt and Beardsley (2007) introduced the concept of "intentional fallacy" in their notorious eleventh footnote (p. 814). The author's intent didn't matter in this case as much: the intentional initial "meaning" could be joined with ampliative meaning created by the reader. The most vivid example of this is, of course, the philological restriction imposed on a lexeme between any given time period and their reading now. For example, if we take William Butler Yeats' *Lapis Lazuli*, we have in the third line the lexeme "gay": "I have heard that hysterical women say/ They are sick of the palette and fiddle-bow, / Of poets that are always gay" (Yeats) which, obviously, for Yeats who wrote it in the 1930s, meant "bright or lively-looking" and didn't have any intention to push the reader towards ambiguity regarding poets' sexuality (Fry, 2010). However, Wimsatt and Beardsley (2007) would argue, much to the dismay of philologists, that the meaning of the piece should not be restrained by confining the meaning of the words to the historical period. Instead, "gay" in this poem, if read now, could offer us an interesting insight into the gay poet community. So, instead of people getting sick of cheerful poets who, angering increasingly grim people, see something bright on the industrial post-war horizon, we get quite a modern anger of the women who have something against poets who are attracted to the same gender as they are. The latter, even if more challenging to justify, is still feasible and offers us an additional struggle with the poem. However, the question of the author wasn't resolved since the New Critics did account on the writer to give us the "initial" meaning. The ampliative character of the reader's interpretation which New Critics offered didn't give enough deference to the reader and still emphasized the immense agency of the author. The reader was still the secondary character.

1.2 Post-Structuralist Views on the Role of the Author & Definition of the Authenticity

However, when post-structuralists came into place, the author was happily dethroned. Roland Barthes (1968), in his Death of the Author, gives this description of the creation of the literary work:

> The modern writer (scriptor) is born simultaneously with his text; he is in no way supplied with a being which precedes or transcends his writing, he is in no way the subject of which his book is the predicate; there is no other time than that of the utterance, and every text is eternally written here and now (p. 64).

Here, the author is not an identity which is expressed through writing and which is superior to the writing. Instead, the writer is "born" with the writing - just like the experience of the reader is born while reading. The reader, finally, receives the same kind of dereference the author does and can interpret the work however their experiences and background direct them. Echoing Barthes, "The birth of the reader must be ransomed by the death of the Author" (p. 67).

The author was, however, still acknowledged with creating a work of literary merit, even if it will be re-created by the reader within the process of reading. After such a long and tedious arrival to the acceptance of the reader's essential role in literature, the author wanted (more than needed) to find new ways to influence the audience rather than simply dictating the interpretation (Derrida, 1976). In the mind of the academic majority, if the author could find some way to universally influence the reader, to discover some device which would elicit the same or similar response from any reader, that would be by changing the structure of the work and not by trying to express unambiguous meaning. This led multiple researchers to hearken back to defining literature, and, in particular, text. The notion of text was always independent of the reader/author. It was one of the three pillars of the literary process: "author" - "text" - "reader" with no center to this structure. Having dethroned the author, and not being able to do anything with the reader, the attention turned to the text wondering if it was as independent as everybody claimed previously (Adorno, 1991, pp. 7-13). A new theory was born that the text, being an essential part of literature, isn't independent: it is born by the reader in the process of reading. This relates to what Barthes wrote but concerns the reader rather than the scriptor (author). Therefore, both the author and the reader were said to be responsible for creating the text. The former with creating the means which would influence the latter with some degree of predictability, and the latter, oddly enough, with their effort to overcome the influences. Effort, however, is not ability: the reader should not be able to overcome the text (which would mean understanding the author's intent which is impossible per se), but instead, struggling, discover it for themselves. Therefore, a structural tension, or structural limitation, is created, which relates mainly to the author (Brake, 2019). Being able to predict the reaction to an inherently complex sequence of composition vs falling into so-called "fast fiction" where everything is so predictable that there's no struggle Via this structure, both the authenticity and the mutual concession is reached. Authenticity, thus, derives its definition from the tension: such text is authentic which, requiring the reader to work, makes them an integral part of the text.

The "work" which the reader is required to do while experiencing a piece of writing is very important. Looking into the old dichotomies of story/plot and, synonymously, content/form, one might see that the author, engaging in the act of writing, cannot impose the story (if we, for a minute, diverge from the unification of form and content) which is shaped by the reader's conscious and subjective response. However, the author can impose form. At times, the author can even reveal the form through self-reflexivity. The complicated nature of this form which makes readers struggle to make a connection to the text is an inherent part of post-structuralist literature since it, as noted above, proves the authenticity of the work and supports the re-defined notion of "text".

2. Discussion of Cole's *Open City*

In his *Open City*, Cole (2012) constructs a challenging text, but he doesn't predetermine the complexities the reader experiences in response to this text. There is one core argument that is made in this essay: the work itself is inherently complex, requiring the reader to work in order to connect with it proving, therefore, its authenticity and making the reader an integral part of the text. The complexity has a dual character: it is first intended by the author, and then re-created by the reader in the process of reading.

There is no doubt that Cole's work is complex in structure: the main character easily jumps from one topic to another and omits pieces in logical chains creating suspense which is not easy for the reader to

overcome. A vivid example of this complexity is the first paragraph of the last chapter of the novel. A paragraph is an essential unit of the text. It also is the smallest part of any text which provides context within it (unlike one sentence which often can't provide enough context). Therefore, it is reasonable to take exactly a paragraph in order to analyze the structural relationships within it. It is allegedly representative of the logical structures in the work overall. In the paragraph below, the main character, who has had a meeting with a girl from his adolescence who accused him of rape which led to Julius' repression, describes his daily life.

(1) Monday was my first full day in private practice. (2) The practice, which my senior partner, David Ng, has run for fourteen years, is on the Bowery. (3) It's a pleasant office, on the third floor of a prewar building, with windows that open out to a clear view of lamp shops across the street, and the uncluttered sky above them. (4) There has been no sign of this year's bird migrations yet, but I know they will come. (5) At quiet moments, I will be able to take the auspices to my heart's content. (6) It has been a busy month: only last week, I moved into a small apartment on West Twenty-first Street. (7) The view there isn't good, but it is a desirable neighborhood (as the realtor reminded me ad infinitum) and I am within walking distance of the office. (8) A few weeks ago, I had the hand surgery I had been putting off. (9) The pain is gone (Cole, 2012, p. 238, numbering added).

In this piece, the main character talks about the following ideas (the separation according to need for context which will be explained later on):

1. The character's new experience with private practice: sentences 1 to 3.
2. Bird migration: sentences 4 and 5.
3. Last month and moving the houses: sentences 6 and 7.
4. Recent surgery: sentences 8 and 9.

The text, however, does not provide nearly enough information about these four topics. One of the key elements - transitions - is absent. A particularly vivid example of this is ideas 1 and 2. Having begun narration about the full day in practice, the main character jumps off the topic and shifts it to bird migration. As if hooked onto the last words of the third sentence "the uncluttered sky above them," the main character shifts his focus to a detail which was secondary or even tertiary to the initial narration. This could be taken by the reader as an element of self-reflexivity through which the text reveals its structure. The ideas seem evidently choppy and disconnected which creates suspense: the reader needs to build (rather than restore) all the links themselves. Building the links between four disconnected ideas establishes the reader as a means of connection, becoming an integral part of the text. Even though, as Derrida (1976) claimed, there are infinite truths which all could serve as connections between two ideas, the only unified response which the author is interested in is struggle. If every reader, trying to build a connection, will have to involve their background and subjectivity in order to make the link and advance in the text, the unified response (the struggle) is achieved.

As mentioned earlier, all connections in the reading are to be made by the reader and the author forges the struggle which the reader experiences while making the connections. However, this struggle is indefinite since the author doesn't and cannot know what the reader will struggle with precisely. Therefore, the author omits the connections while writing (intentionally or unintentionally), and the reader builds possibly those and possibly *other* connections while reading. Thus, the struggle the reader experiences can

be predicted by the author only on the level of its existence. In other words, the author can only ensure the fact that the reader *will* struggle. The author can never ensure or know what the reader will struggle with. Looking at the chosen paragraph, *a* reader might see the following division of ideas:
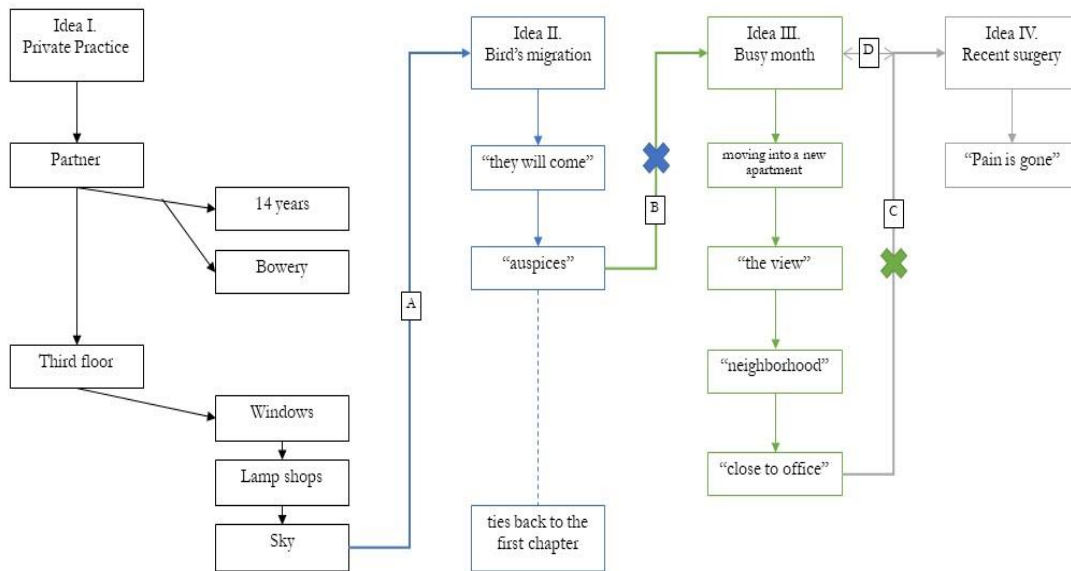

Figure 1: Connection map of an excerpt from Teju Cole's *Open City*

Here, the ideas are separated into hierarchical clusters looking at their mutual need for context. For example, the sentence which mentions "auspices" doesn't need context on itself since the larger context for one sentence is neglectable and often non-existent. However, "Idea II. Bird migration" which consists of "they will come" and "auspices" on the diagram does need context. This need for context is one property using which different ideas can be sorted into hierarchical clusters.

The larger connections between clusters (contrary to connections within them), as explained above, can be illustrated on the example of the idea A. The latter "hooks" the next one: as if distracted from the first idea, the narrator shifts to the second one which could make some readers (though not all of them) wonder why and how those ideas are connected. However, this is not to say that there is a unified classification of ideas, and, therefore, a way to connect ideas. The take is that there is *a need* for one. The example given above is merely an example and not a dictated methodology. This is a way for the reader to struggle with the piece in a way that *cannot* be predetermined by the author.

A point should also be made for the larger connections within the book. The case of "auspices" serves as a perfect example for such explication. The word "auspices" was mentioned in the first chapter, on the second page of the book. This is another link which the reader is free to build, or, indeed, to neglect. Neglection serves as a fully feasible option since the struggle will be executed even if it happens only within the paragraph or only within the idea to which the "auspices" belong. The connection to the second chapter is an alternative or ampliative one which also makes for an efficient struggle, and, some could assert, is a connection intended by the author. However, the author's intent, of course, doesn't matter.

Similarly, dangerous is the hermeneutical affliction of playing in psychic and guessing what the author "wanted to say" by thematic context which was used. Even if extending attributive speculations to "so what?" question which is indeed not pertaining directly to the author, the response will always be built on the preconceived fallacies of "what the author wanted to say" (e.g., by mentioning 9/11 in the book the author wanted to say that it played an important role in shaping the disconnected ideas in Julius' head). The nature of "so what?" is essentially "how what the author wanted to say influences our perception of this world?" (e.g., that 9/11 shaped the experiences of the character through his choppy thinking and serves us as a reminder of the tragedy and alike). The latter is subjective in every case and cannot be expressed in the "the author wanted" form. The author didn't want to say – the author said. They said what they could, and now the reader gets to say a little something as well.

The structural constraints which the paragraph analyzed above contains are a perfect means for the author to ensure that there is a struggle for the reader which would unify the response to this piece. There is no place in this argument for saying that some specific outcome for the reader is intended by the author. Yet again, the interpretation of the thematic context is extraneous and goes against principles of post-structuralism. The time period can be considered yet another point that could be connected to others by the reader in a way that is unpredictable. The only predictable fact is that the reader will struggle. The author doesn't know what the reader will struggle with precisely, and in which manner. However, the author intends on creating a work that contains some amount of undefined struggle (as opposed to fast-fiction). The meaning is created by both the author and the reader: the writer created the work while writing it, the reader re-creates (not restores, not guesses, etc.) the work while reading it. Thus, both participate in the process.

Similar analysis (the hierarchical clustering and classification) could be done with other elements of the text (chapter, multiple chapters, the structure of the book overall). However, it cannot be done on the level of a sentence: the sentence doesn't show the structure of the text. As if taking a canvas, one thread is not representative of the structure of the whole, but multiple threads are. As such, the central meaning of the work cannot be in the interpretation, but rather in the struggle to create the interpretation through building connections which is inevitably pursued by any reader. It further proves the authenticity of the novel and the role of the reader in forging it.

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