

Reading Behind, Within, and In Front of the Text

Behind the Text

AUTHOR-CENTERED: The meaning is found in the author's intention (authorial intention) or the original readers' reception of the message. What did the author intend to communicate to the original reader(s)?

WORLDVIEW: The presuppositions, values, culture, language of the author and the author's world.

METAPHOR: The text is a *window* to the author's intention (or in the original readers' reception).

METHODS: Discovering the meaning of the text requires historical, linguistic, sociological, and archaeological analysis, including source, form, and redactive criticism. Such methods help retrieve the author's intention and/or the original readers' reception of the message.

QUESTIONS: What circumstances prompted the author to write? What sources were used? What was the geographical location of the author and the first readers? What was the history of the text's development?

PROBLEMS: (1) Can there be a guarantee that the author has successfully transferred authorial intention to the written page? Is the text an undistorted window to the author's mind? (2) Understanding the text requires the reader to "imaginatively" reconstruct the historical and social milieu of the author.

Within the Text

TEXT-CENTERED: Meaning is found within the text, which is antonymous from the author. The text is a finished, freestanding public work of literature. The text is self-sufficient; author's intention, irrelevant.

WORLDVIEW: The presuppositions and values created by and within the text (story, poem, etc.).

METAPHOR: The text is a *stain-glassed mosaic* showing intricate relationships within it.

METHODS: Do not use information outside the text to interpret the text. Discovering the meaning and value of the text requires a close and careful reading of the full text. Attention must be given to the artistry of the text—various linguistic and literary relationships within the text. *New Criticism* focuses on the artistry of the text and *Structuralism* on the embedded conventional codes.

QUESTIONS: What is the genre of the text—narrative, law, poetry, etc.? If it is narrative, what is the story (plot, characterization, setting, and theme)? How is the story told (implied author, narrator, literary devices)?

PROBLEMS: (1) The author and the reader are pronounced dead. (2) The understanding of a text seems to be enriched and improved by understanding its history.

In Front of the Text

READER-CENTERED: Meaning is generated by the reader's response to the text. The reader collaborates with the text (not the author) in creating meanings. The reader is both a subject (acts on the text) and an object (acted on by the text).

WORLDVIEW: The presuppositions, values, language, and self-understanding of the reader.

METAPHOR: The text is a *mirror* reflecting the reader's interaction with the text.

METHODS: The reader brings a vast world of experience, interests, presuppositions, prejudices, methodologies, and competencies to the text. Thus, methods will focus on how readers read texts (Wolfgang Iser) and the communities that influence readers' worldviews (Stanley Fish). There are many forms of criticism, including reader response, feminist, political, liberation, and deconstruction.

QUESTIONS: What is the social location of the reader? What communities influence the reader's worldview and reading competencies? What are the race, gender, family, and education of the reader? How do readers fill in the *gaps of indeterminacy*¹?

PROBLEMS: (1) Denies communication from the author. (2) The text can have multiple meanings, which depend completely on the reader; it suggests that meaning is relative and not stable.

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¹ Filling in *gaps of indeterminacy* refers to the process whereby readers supply information from their own experience to make sense of the text. An author cannot possibly provide every detail from the real world in a text; thus, there are "gaps of silence" in every text that allow readers to imaginatively bridge those gaps. What bridges those gaps are the reader's own experience, presuppositions, prejudices, etc.