

BEYOND CONFORMITY: THE EVER-EVOLVING RELATIONSHIP OF TEXT AND TOOLS

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Abstract

This paper aims to delve into the intricate interplay between 'text' and 'tools', while seeking to provide an explanatory framework. To achieve this objective, the paper engenders the concept of 'Text Phenomenon', a pivotal element in this dynamic. It posits that the text phenomenon generates potentiality, subsequently realised through the development of literary tools. The paper conducts a comprehensive examination of the diverse functions of these tools. Furthermore, the paper challenges the notion of confining literature creation within the confines of a single tool or prescribed set of tools. Ultimately, the paper establishes a cyclical relationship between the text and tools, elucidating the roles of each component in this process.

Keywords: text phenomenon, tools, theory, potentiality, actualization

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Introduction

With any kind of literature, there also exist articulate or inarticulate tools that facilitate the meaning-making process of a text. Literature's timeless existence ensures that these instruments transcend temporal boundaries. Moreover, just as new literary creations continually emerge, the continual development of novel interpretive instruments remains an ongoing endeavor. Consequently, the interplay between texts and tools becomes a captivating phenomenon, marked by a dynamic interplay. This interplay and its subsequent ramifications shape the trajectory of literature and culture. The objective of this paper is to analyse the complex relationship between textual compositions and the instruments of interpretation and critique.

The classic dilemma of whether the text or the tool came first parallels the age-old chicken-and-egg question. Individuals may take sides based on personal preference. However, this paper introduces a fresh perspective by contending that the connection between text and tool is not a linear one but rather cyclic. By scrutinising a well-defined cyclical pattern and delineating the roles of its constituent elements, this paper also endeavours to counter the excessive emphasis on tools observed in literary discourse since the mid-20th century.

The Text Phenomenon

The transition from oral culture to textual culture is a very significant one. The discourse emerging through oral tradition and that arising from textual traditions exhibit distinct characteristics. The introduction of writing stirred considerable interest among intellectuals of the past. Plato found text as foreign as the computer culture appeared to the generation of the 20th-century (Ong 77). Although textuality is now a normalised aspect of contemporary cultures, affecting individuals almost indifferently, the world underwent profound changes with the advent of writing. Numerous texts have arguably left a tremendous impact on culture, consciousness, and perception. Examples include Darwin's *Origin of Species*, Marx's *Das Kapital*, George Orwell's *1984*, and Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, among others.

Hence, a text cannot be seen as an isolated production. It is an event that occurs in a context, influencing its context through its discourse. This event extends beyond the author, with critics like Barthes deeming the association of the text with the author 'tyrannical' (Barthes, 'The Death of the Author' 143). It is crucial to note that while the text as an isolated entity belongs to the past, the 'text phenomenon' remains in the present. This concept aligns with Barthes's view in his essay 'From Work to Text', where he describes text as something dynamic (Barthes 155). This process primarily shapes the event known as the text phenomenon.

Further elaboration is required to explain this text phenomenon. In simple terms, the text phenomenon is the manifestation of ideas and meanings present in a text, in the common sphere of life that lies outside the text. This text phenomenon predominantly traverses what Jung refers to as the 'collective unconscious' (Jung 3) profoundly influencing our lives. It is always present in an inarticulate form. However, tools are required to articulate this text phenomenon and bring it into the realm of language. In essence, these tools aid in expressing this very text phenomenon. A highly successful text phenomenon signifies that the utterances/ideas present in the text have permeated the public domain to such an extent that they have become part of everyday discourse. One does not necessarily need to have read the text to encounter its text phenomenon. The ideas of Marx offer a similar example. People allude to Marxist ideas in their daily conversation without being aware of it. The knowledge disseminated through Shakespeare's works is another instance. These are prominent text phenomena that we experience, facilitate, and enact in our daily lives.

Text Phenomenon Creates Literary Tools

Humanist criticism emphasises the impartial and objective assessment of a text (Arnold 18). Conversely, a more postmodern approach to literary criticism suggests embracing multiple interpretations and perspectives on a text, often involving the 'removal of the author' (Barthes, 'The Death of the Author' 145). Despite these differing viewpoints, the central purpose of criticism remains constant: to influence the discourse surrounding a text.

In the realm of critical discourse, many texts that eventually became canonical classics initially faced sluggish reception. They either gained momentum later on or were recognized as ahead of their time in the years to come. Some of these texts were initially confounding to readers, with critics like Johnson labelling the metaphysical works of Donne and others as a 'violent yoking of the most heterogeneous ideas' (Johnson, 'Cowley' 16) until T.S. Eliot revitalised them with his innovative concept of the 'dissociation of sensibility' (Eliot 288). Numerous literary masterpieces were rejected by contemporary discourse because they lacked the appropriate tools for deciphering their depth. However, the potential inherent in these texts always existed, awaiting the creation of suitable tools

to unlock it. This latent potential resides within the text phenomenon, and the hope is that literary critics will realise it as soon as possible.

The potentiality of metaphysical poetry, for instance, was unlocked by Eliot's 'dissociation of sensibility.' Similarly, feminist literary tools were employed to reevaluate the works of various female writers, actualizing their potential and establishing them as significant literary texts. Consider Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*– how many can now approach this text without the lens of postcolonialism? The continued relevance of the *Heart of Darkness* text phenomenon is a result of the development of this critical tool.

It would be inaccurate to assume that these tools render the text relevant; rather, it is the opposite. The text, or sometimes a collection of texts, as a phenomenon, creates a potentiality that is subsequently brought to fruition through the development of the corresponding literary tool. This tool, in turn, serves to enhance the text phenomenon. Every literary tool or theory can be traced back to specific texts responsible for its creation by virtue of their inherent phenomena.

The Case Study of Psychoanalysis

The emergence of psychoanalysis within the realm of literary theory marked a pivotal moment in literature's evolution. It equipped critics and readers with a fresh lens through which to scrutinise literary texts, elevating the significance of characters' inner workings. Various Freudian concepts found application in the analysis of texts, unveiling a somewhat counterintuitive hypothesis. It seemed as though the psychoanalytic theory and tool preceded the literary phenomena (an ever-present entity, as previously mentioned) subjected to analysis. Yet, upon careful examination, it became clear that Freud's theories could not have arisen without the presence of specific literary phenomena prevalent during his time.

Sigmund Freud, a devoted reader well-versed in Greek mythology, contemporary literature, and canonical works, held a profound fascination for the writings of Shakespeare. Norman N. Holland points out that,

Freud's biographers tell us that he began reading Shakespeare at the age of eight and read him over and over again; he was always ready with a Shakespearian quotation. He admired particularly Shakespeare's power of expression (Freud himself was no mean stylist) and his insights into human nature (163)

Freud repeatedly references Shakespearean plays in his works, with a particular emphasis on *Hamlet*, as seen in his renowned work, *Interpretation of Dreams*. In the fifth chapter of the book, he mentions Greek mythological figures like Zeus (253), and literary classics such

as *Oedipus Rex*, *Hamlet*, and *Macbeth* to delve into the realm of dreams involving the demise of a beloved individual (Freud 261).

In his 1919 essay 'The Uncanny,' Freud extensively references various authors and their works to illustrate the concept of the uncanny. He discusses ETA Hoffman's 'The SandMan'(168), Shakespeare's plays with uncanny elements (*Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Julius Caesar*, *The Tempest*, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*) (171), and Friedrich Schiller's lyrical ballad 'Der Ring des Polykrates'(178). Freud's approach in analysing these works often leans more towards literary criticism than psychoanalysis, highlighting his role as not only the father of psychoanalysis but also the first psychoanalytic critic. Beyond these major texts, Freud also delved into writings on other literary works, such as Wilhelm Jensen's *Gradiva* (Writings on Art and Literature 3) and Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* (Writings on Art and Literature 234).

Perhaps the most conspicuous example of the intersection between literature and psychoanalysis is the Oedipus Complex, derived from Sophocles' famous play *Oedipus Rex*. Freud's initial reference to Greek myths, the Oedipus myth and Henrik Ibsen (258) in *The Interpretation of Dreams* forms the cornerstone of his theory of the Oedipus Complex.

Harold Bloom, in his work *The Western Canon, The Books and School of the Ages*, audaciously contends that all of Freud's ideas were already latent in Shakespeare's works, suggesting that Freud merely gave them a more prosaic form (25). These instances not only underscore the literary influences on Freud's life and work but also the broader impact of these literary works on popular ideas. Returning to the earlier hypothesis, it becomes evident that the collective literary phenomena encompassing the works of Sophocles, Shakespeare, Goethe, Dostoevsky, Hoffman, Ibsen, and others frequently referenced by Freud in his writings exerted an undeniable influence on the psychoanalytic theory. This does not diminish Freud's role and contributions, shaped in part by his experiences with numerous patients. However, it is not an exaggeration to assert that the theory of psychoanalysis would not have come into being without the presence of these literary phenomena. The psychological depth found in works like Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*, Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, *The Idiot*, and *The Brothers Karamazov*, among others, created a fertile ground that was cultivated by the psychoanalytic tools developed by Freud.

A parallel can be drawn with the works of Homer. In 'Peri Houpsous,' Longinus explores the concept of the sublime in Homer's writings and highlights Homer's profound influence on subsequent writers and theorists, most notably Plato.

Thus Homer's name is associated with a numerous band of illustrious disciples—not only Herodotus, but Stesichorus before him, and the great

Archilochus, and above all Plato, who from the great fountain-head of Homer's genius drew into himself innumerable tributary streams. (Longinus and HAVELL 25)

This attests to the enduring impact of Homer's literary phenomena on the development of literary theory and philosophical thought.

Tools Creating Text

Thus far, it has been established that literature generates theory and tools through its text phenomenon. The focus now shifts to the second argument in the paper. At this juncture, the reader encounters the question: 'What would happen if theory starts influencing literature?' To comprehend this concept within the context of the preceding discussion, it has been argued that literature, via what has been termed the 'text phenomenon,' exerts influence over the development of specific tools designed to comprehend and enhance this very text phenomenon. However, these tools serve multiple functions. They also contribute significantly to the contemporary literary critique, a facet heavily involved in shaping the prevalent definition of exemplary literature. This established conception of exemplary literature, forged through the dominant tools of the era, exerts an impact on writers of that time, compelling them to adhere to these established standards. This notion, in itself, is not novel. Harold Bloom refers to this very pressure as 'the Anxiety of Influence' (Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* 6). Bloom's primary thesis argues that poets face hindrances in their creative endeavours due to their complex relationships with precursor poets. Although he extensively explores methods to overcome this influence, his examination of this complex relationship remains somewhat limited.

Applying this argument here, it becomes evident that poets, or artists in a broader sense (as Bloom employs the same term in his work), are responsible for crafting exemplary literature, which, in turn, possesses its own text phenomenon. This phenomenon engenders the potential for the development of tools and theories. Under favourable conditions, this potentiality is realised, leading to the fruition of these tools and theories. As previously discussed, these tools and critical frameworks dictate the discourse within the realm of literature and establish standards for what constitutes 'exemplary literature.' Consequently, it can be asserted that the relationship Bloom elucidates is predominantly concentrated within the prevalent literary theories of the period. Therefore, it is these theories and tools that serve as impediments to contemporary artists, necessitating their efforts to overcome these obstacles in order to create exemplary literature.

The author presents three significant reasons for caution when adhering to a particular tool or set of tools in the creation of a text. Firstly, the use of such tools can commodify art, reducing it to a capitalistic product designed to meet popular standards. The analogy of a chair is employed to illustrate this point. For instance, if a chair is constructed and a tool, in this case, a screwdriver, is developed to deconstruct it, and subsequently becomes popular,

carpenters may opt to produce chairs specifically designed for disassembly with that screwdriver. While such a practice may enhance efficiency and ease in the realm of chairs, it does not translate effectively to the world of literature.

In literature, crafting a text that conforms strictly to one set of tools and theories is discouraged because it hinders the ability to achieve what Viktor Shklovsky terms 'ostranenie' or 'defamiliarization' (Shklovsky 80). Such adherence results in a predictable product tailored to popular tastes rather than fostering opportunities for the emergence of fresh interpretations and meanings.

Secondly, art that conforms to one popular tool ends up being disingenuous. It finds a very convenient way of earning a risk-free and politically correct label. Let us look at an example from film criticism. In the 1980s and 90s, a feminist tool named the Bechdel Test became very popular amongst media and literary critics. The Bechdel Test was a simple tool developed to evaluate the representation of women in films, or any other kind of narrative. The tool originally appeared in Alisson Bechdel's comic strip 'The Rules' in the series 'Dykes to Watch Out For' (1983-2008). The tool mentions three criteria that a work must meet, (a) there must be at least two named female characters in the work, (b) these characters must have a conversation with each other, and (c) the subject of this conversation must be something other than a man. It instantly became a part of what Brian Droitcour calls the 'vernacular criticism'(n.p.) This highly popular tool helped people to make better sense of female representation in the narratives of the time. Agarwal et al. observe, '...movies that fail the test tend to portray women as less-important and peripheral characters' (838).

This is how a tool assists in uncovering the layers of meaning created within a text. However, what if a filmmaker decides to produce a film that adheres to the Bechdel Test? This implies that they simply introduce two female characters who engage in a conversation unrelated to men, seemingly allowing the film to pass the Bechdel Test. But does this guarantee that the portrayal of women in the film is devoid of problematic elements? Mere compliance with the test does not absolve the filmmaker of potentially including sexist undertones in the movie. Consequently, creators may find an expedient way to shield themselves from feminist critique by merely ensuring the film passes the Bechdel Test. Thus, when tools begin to shape the very essence of artistic expression, the resulting product veers away from true creative exploration and becomes a slave to the tool's conformity.

Finally, the text is reduced to a mere instrument for propagating a tool, theory, or ideology. Those who uphold the supremacy of art will perceive this challenge as particularly perilous. This is due to the fact that the text now assumes a secondary role, with its primary

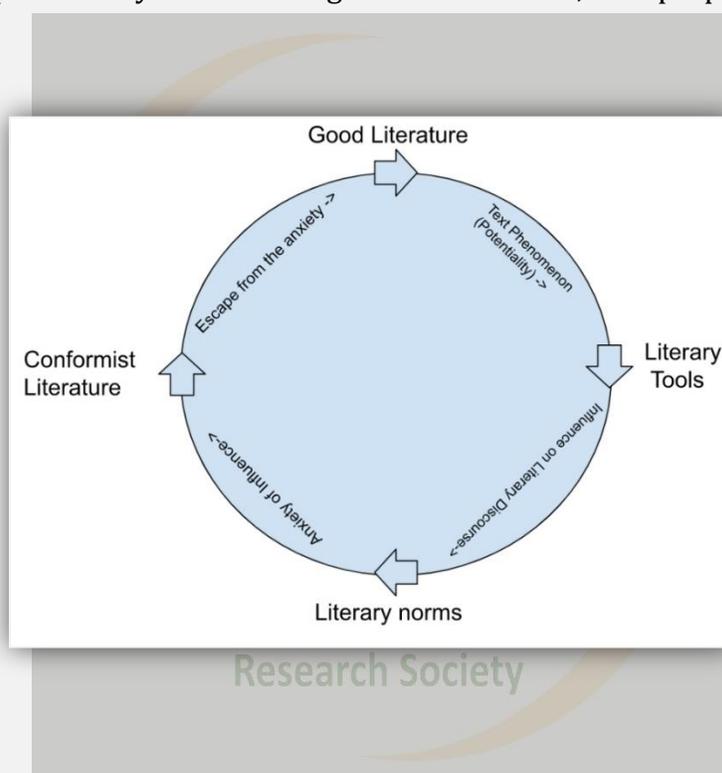
purpose being the promotion of a specific ideological interpretation through a selected set of tools. The term 'ideology' seems appropriate to use here because, more often than not, a tool stems from an underlying ideology. The recurrent utilisation of such tools only serves to bolster the ideology from which they originated. In addition to the previously mentioned capitalist pressures, artists also contend with ideological pressures. An illustrative case in point can be found in the film 'Haider', Vishal Bharadwaj's Hindi adaptation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The director explicitly integrates Freudian theories so extensively into the film that it becomes more Freudian than Shakespearean, thus endorsing ideas like the Oedipus Complex. One of several instances of this is when Haider's mother, Ghazala, remarks to Haider, 'Do you remember what you used to say as a child?...When I grow up, I will marry my mother.' (laughs) You would sleep between your father and me, on purpose. You'd fight him every time he touched me.' (Bharadwaj 1:41:43). Even someone with a basic understanding of Freudian psychology can discern the theory, tool, and ideology being forcibly impressed upon the viewers' minds in this scene. Moreover, the constant sexual tension, prevalent between Haider and Ghazala throughout the movie keeps on imposing on an informed viewer Freud rather than letting them simply relish Shakespeare. This is not a moral critique; rather, it underscores how the character, plot, themes, subtlety, and the text itself are relegated to secondary roles, with the theory taking precedence as the primary focus. While we began by examining how tools serve the text, in this case, the text is serving the tool.

Conclusion

Harold Bloom in his book *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* writes about Shakespeare that –

He contains you; you cannot subsume him. You cannot illuminate him with a new doctrine, be it Marxism or Freudianism or Demanian linguistic skepticism. Instead, he will illuminate the doctrine, not by prefiguration but by postfiguration as it were: all of Freud that matters most is there in Shakespeare already, with a persuasive critique of Freud besides. The Freudian map of the mind is Shakespeare's; Freud seems only to have prosified it. Or, to vary my point, a Shakespearean reading of Freud illuminates and overwhelms the text of Freud; a Freudian reading of Shakespeare reduces Shakespeare, or would if we could bear a reduction that crosses the line into absurdities of loss. (Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* 25)

While good literature creates new tools, a genius text generates such an abundant potentiality that its textual phenomenon continues to shape the development of new tools and theories. Ultimately, one arrives at a cyclical comprehension of the relationship between text and theory. Good literature, through its textual phenomenon, manifests potentiality within the realm of literary discourse. In favourable circumstances, this potentiality materialises in the creation of tools. These tools, in turn, exert an influence on the contemporary literary discourse, leading to the establishment of literary conventions. The literary conventions of a particular era subsequently generate a sense of anxiety regarding their influence, causing art to conform to established norms. Finally, good literature triumphs over this anxiety and engenders a unique textual phenomenon, thereby fostering further potentiality for the emergence of new tools, thus perpetuating the cycle.



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