

A Note on 'Literary' Pragmatics

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([Vanity Fea, Nov. 11, 2011](#))

(From a letter to a Chinese correspondent, who asks about the implications of the views of M. H. Abrams, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Roger Sell from the point of view of the pragmatics of literature):

As to your questions on pragmatics... Well, to me literary pragmatics is of course an interesting field, but we should not lose sight of pragmatics in the general sense. What I mean is, literary pragmatics may be thought of sometimes as addressing only those issues which are specific to literary communication, reading, writing, narrative or poetic fictions... That is, literature is a special communicative context, and therefore it has its own pragmatic specificities. The concepts in literary pragmatics are derived from those of general pragmatics, and many of the issues are related to the issues we find in other neighbouring pragmatic fields (e.g. the pragmatics of language generally, or the pragmatics of film, etc.), yet they have a specificity of their own, special historical traditions (genres, conventions, etc.) and that's why we speak of literary pragmatics as a field in its own right.

BUT, it would be a mistake to restrict the pragmatic study of literature to "literary pragmatics" in that sense—in the sense of "what is specific to literature". Because literature also portrays or uses many pragmatic dimensions of communication which are not specifically literary. For instance, the verbal interaction of the characters is also pragmatolinguistic, although not only literary, in the sense that many pragmatic elements of actual conversations are relevant in the understanding and portraying of

fictional narrated interactions. Same thing for the nonverbal elements of communication, those are not linguistic and not specifically literary, but literary works do use them. (There is a good work in three volumes by Fernando Poyatos, in Spanish alas, on literature and nonverbal communication—*La comunicación no verbal*, but see the English translation, *Nonverbal Communication across Disciplines*, Benjamins, 2002).

So, in a global pragmatic analysis of a literary work we would have to take into account both what is specifically literary and what is not specifically literary but is nevertheless relevant to literature, at the level of the characters' communication or at the level of the communication between author and reader.

You ask about a comparison of M. H. Abrams's and Roger Sell's theories... well that would be a whole essay I'm afraid. But I can point out that Sell is more aware than Abrams of the mediating role of the critic - mediation between the author's and the reader's context. Criticism involves a recontextualization, and sometimes the Founding Fathers of criticism, including Abrams, are not sufficiently aware of that—they tend to emphasize the author's context, which the reader should recreate imaginatively or adapt to. Of course, not in the narrow historical or biographical sense, but in the sense of what another critic (Wendell V. Harris, *Interpretive Acts*, 1988) calls the "wonted context", the intended context which the work carries along with it so to speak, the way it "wants" to be read.

That is a crucial dimension of the literary work, but then there is another dimension (which is dialogical, Bakhtinian) and which too often is not consistently articulated or conceptualized. I mean that works are not used only in the communicative context which is established, or which they establish, between author and Reader 1, the intended reader. The works are also recontextualized, and they are used by Reader 2, an unexpected or unintended reader, perhaps with a context of her own or an agenda of her own, to discuss other reader's reactions, perhaps. And this Reader 2 is interacting with Reader 3, addressing this other Reader 3 in a context which the author didn't even think of (for instance, a historical study of his style in a university course). And then Reader 4 may read the critical account by Reader 2, and disagree and recontextualize the whole thing—because Reader

4 is not Reader 3, readers are quite often unexpected creatures, especially those readers who take the pen or the keyboard and produce a text of their own which is a response to the original text, and which addresses an audience of their own, different from the writer's intended audience. Perhaps they haven't read the original work, even; what I mean is that works are used in a variety of communicative and pragmatic contexts. Sell's work is aware of this, even though sometimes his critical priorities are still within the sphere the original writer's communicative context—which is crucial, I'm not going to deny this!

[Reseña de *Literature as Communication: The Foundations of Mediating Criticism*](#)

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