The Role and the Significance of the Reader and the Act of Reading in Roland Barthes's "The Death of the Author"

Ariya Jati*

Diponegoro University, Department of English, Semarang, Indonesia

Abstract. The reader and the act of reading play an important part in Barthes's "The Death of the Author". Barthes's perspective of writing and the writer is appealing for this study to conduct. The perspective will be elucidated upon Iser's concept of reader and text. The elucidation is conducted as a library study. The study results in the interaction between the reader and the text in one reading environment. In all, the role of the reader begins when that of the writer ends in the environment.

1 Introduction

This study intends to analyse the role and significance of the reader and the act of reading in Roland Barthes's "The Death of the Author". It examines Barthes's "The Death of the Author" in order to discover its essential features. The features in the aforementioned Barthes's essay are, then, set to bring about effects in the reader and the act of reading. The features in the essay are, furthermore, set to describe participation of the reader and the act of reading within a text.

Roland Barthes's "The Death of the Author" in this study is examined through the viewpoint of Wolfgang Iser. The viewpoint is concerned with Wolfgang Iser's concept of reader and text relation. It comprises Iser's indeterminacy and the reader's response, interaction between text and reader, and reading process as a phenomenological approach.

This study starts off with Roland Barthes's essential featured discovered from "The Death of the Authors". Then it moves to Wolfgang Iser's viewpoint on reader's response. Iser's viewpoint is derived from two of his essays entitled "Indeterminacy and the Reader's Response" and "Interaction between text and Reader".

Prior to Wolfgang Iser's essential features in his two aforementioned essays, this study presents foregrounding upon a reader in a text. This foregrounding is presented by Susan R. Suleiman. In addition, this study also presents a review upon readerly involvement. This review is presented by K.M. Newton as well as by Raman Selden and Peter Widdowson.

* Corresponding author: ariya.jati@live.undip.ac.id

2 Roland Barthes's "The Death of the Author"

Roland Barthes states that the author enters into her or his own death when her or his writing begins [1]. Her or his writing is the destruction of her or his voice. The writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where her or his subject slips away. It is the negative where her or his identity is lost, starting with the identity of the body writing. As soon as it is written, disconnection occurs. That is when the author loses her or his voice of origin. That is when s/he is said to enter her or his own death.

Barthes, moreover, utters that the text is read in such a way that the author is absent [2]. The author is veritably distanced. He is thought to exist before the text. The author thinks, suffers, and lives for the text before he diminishes, like a figurine at the far end of the literary stage.

A text, as Barthes continues, is not a line of words releasing a single theological meaning [3]. It is not the message of the Author-God. Yet, a text is a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The author can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original. Thus, the text itself is only a tissue of signs. It is an imitation that is lost or infinitely deferred.

Barthes also assures the total existence of writing. He says that a text is made of multiple writings [4]. The text is drawn from many cultures and it is entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, and contestation. There is, however, one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is not the author, as was hitherto said. The place is the reader. The reader is the space on which all quotations that make up writing are inscribed without any of them being lost. A text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination.

It is conceivable that an author is no longer present in a text when s/he finished writing the text. The text is read for meaning in a particular way by an individual reader. Being read by a reader, the text is centered onto the reader. Thus, the reader, along with her or his act of reading, becomes the focal point for the text.

3 Audience-Oriented Analysis

Susan R. Suleiman regards an act of reading as essential a sense-making activity. This activity, Suleiman points out, consists of the complementary activities of selection and organization, anticipation and retrospection [5]. It is the formulation and modification of expectations in the course of the reading process. Although every reader performs these activities, exactly how they are performed varies from reader to reader and even within a single reader at different times. These variations account for different realizations of a given text.

Despite the variations, Suleiman is certain that there must be room in audience-oriented criticism for descriptions of the reading process [6]. These descriptions, Suleiman explains, go beyond the supposed experience of a generalized reader whether s/he is defined as a contemporary of the author or as someone who lives centuries later. These descriptions, moreover, focus on the actual reading experiences and responses of specific individuals to specific works.

Each reader, therefore, performs her or his individual act of reading when s/he is reading a particular text. This act of reading is at the heart of the reader's reading experience and response to the text. Only when the act of reading is implied upon a text by a reader will the text become meaningful.

4 Wolfgang Iser's "Indeterminacy and the Reader's Response"

Fore mostly, Wolfgang Iser believes that a text can only come to life when it is read [7]. If the text is to be examined, it must be studied through the eyes of the reader. Iser adds up, stating that the relationship between text and reader can be described in two steps. The first step is to indicate the special qualities of a literary text that distinguish it from other kinds of text. The second step will be to name and analyze the basic elements of the cause of the response to literary works.

Then, Wolfgang Iser states that indeterminacy in a text is brought about outside and inside the text [8]. From the outside, a literary text differs from any other text that presents an object which exists independent of the text. Its main characteristic is its peculiar halfway position between the world of real objects and the reader's own world of experience. The act of reading is therefore is a process of seeking to pin down the oscillating structure of the text to some specific meaning. From the inside, literary objects come into being through the unfolding of a variety of views which constitute the object in stages and at the same time give a concrete form for the reader to contemplate. These gaps give the reader a chance to build his own bridges, relating the different aspects of the object which have thus far been revealed to him.

Thus in this way, Iser asserts, every literary invites some form of participation on the part of the reader [9]. A text which lays things out before the reader in such a way that s/he can either reject or accept them will lessen the degree of participation as it allows her or him nothing but a yes or no. Texts with such minimal indeterminacy tend to be tedious, for it is only when the reader is given the chance to participate actively that s/he will regard the text, whose intention s/he himself has helped to compose, as real. Readers generally tend to regard things that they have made themselves as being real. And so it can be said that indeterminacy is the fundamental precondition for reader participation.

The relationship between a text and a reader is affirmable. Only through the reader's act of reading can s/he examine the text. The act of reading, moreover, resists indeterminacy in a text. Externally the act of reading attempts to restrain meaning of the text. Internally the act of reading connects the reader with aspects of the text. So, the act of reading allows the reader to take her or his part in the text.

5 Wolfgang Iser's "Interaction between Text and Reader"

Wolfgang Iser reveals that each literary work has two poles, which might called the artistic and the aesthetic [10]. The artistic pole is the author's text, and the aesthetic is the realization accomplished by the reader. In view of this polarity, it is clear that the work itself cannot be identical with the text or with its actualization but must be situated somewhere between the two. It must inevitably be virtual in character, as it cannot be reduced to the reality of the text or to the subjectivity of the reader, and it is from this virtuality that it derives its dynamism. As the reader passes through the various perspectives offered by the text, and relates the different views and patterns to one another, s/he sets the work in motion, and so sets herself or himself in motion, too.

Blanks, according to Wolfgang Iser, indicate that different segments and patterns of the text are to be connected even though the text itself does not say so [11]. They are the unseen joints of the text. As blanks mark off schemata and textual perspectives from one another, they simultaneously prompt acts of ideation on the reader's part. Consequently when the schemata and perspectives have been linked together, the blanks disappear.

In "Interaction between Text and Reader", Wolfgang Iser mentions two points that need to be emphasized upon the interaction between a text and a reader [12]. The first is that the reader has described the structure of the blank in an abstract, somewhat idealized way in order to explain the pivot on which the interaction between text and reader turns. The latter is that the blank has different structural qualities, which appear to dovetail. The reader fills

in the blank in the text, thereby bringing about a referential field. The blank, arising in turn out of the referential field, is filled in by way of the theme-and-background structure. The vacancy arising from juxtaposed themes and backgrounds is occupied by the reader's standpoint, from which the various reciprocal transformations lead to the emergence of the aesthetic object.

It can be stated here that a literary work is posted in between the text and its actualization. Virtual characters of the work make the text dynamic, which sets motion for a reader. The reader, then, links her or his schemata and textual perspective with segments and patterns of the text. The reader also fills in the blank in the text from her or his standpoint, which arises from her or his theme and background structure. The activities transform the interaction between the text and the reader.

6 Readerly Involvement

K.M. Newton admits that there has been a shift of emphasis towards the reader in much recent theory [13]. In both reception theory and reader-response criticism the role of the reader is seen as particularly crucial. Reception theory has had its greater impact in Germany and reader-response criticism is associated mainly with American criticism. There is, however, some continuity between the two. This continuity is particularly apparent through the work of Wolfgang Iser, who is commonly included in both.

Wolfgang Iser believes that the text has an objective structure even if that structure must be completed by the reader [14]. Iser claims that all texts create gaps or blanks which the reader must use her or his imagination to fill. It is in the interaction between text and reader that aesthetic response is created.

The meaning of the text is never self-formulated; the reader must act upon the textual material in order to produce meaning. Wolfgang Iser argues that literary texts always contain blanks which only the reader can fill [15].

Wolfgang Iser presents the text as a potential structure which is concretized by the reader in relation to her or his extra-literary norms, values and experience [16]. A sort of oscillation is set up between the power of the text to control the way it is read and a reader's concretization of it in terms of her or his own experience. This experience will itself be modified in the act of reading. Meaning, in this theory, lies in the adjustments and revisions to expectations which are brought about in the reader's mind in the process of making sense of her or his dialectical relationship to the text. Iser himself does not entirely resolve the relative weight of the text's determinacy and the reader's experience in this relationship. Nonetheless, it would seem that his emphasis falls more heavily on the latter.

Iser subdivides the term 'reader' into implied reader and actual reader [17]. The implied reader is the reader whom the text creates for itself and amounts to a network of response-inviting structures which predispose her or him to read in certain ways. The actual reader receives certain mental images in the process of reading, which will inevitably be colored by the reader's existing stock of experience.

Iser asserts that the reader's journey through the text is a continuous process of such adjustments [18]. Readers hold in their minds certain expectations, based on their memory of characters and events. Yet, the expectations are continually modified and the memories are transformed as the readers pass through the text. What the readers grasp as they read is only a series of changing viewpoints, not something fixed and fully meaningful at every point.

Iser's emphasis is ultimately phenomenological. The readers' experience of reading is at the centre of the literary process [19]. By resolving the contradictions between the various viewpoints which emerge from the text or by filling the gaps between viewpoints in various ways, the readers take the text into their consciousness and make it their own experience. It

seems that, while texts do set the terms on which the readers actualize meanings, the readers' own store of experience will take some part in the process. The readers' existing consciousness will have to make certain internal adjustments in order to receive and process the alien viewpoints which the text presents as reading takes place. This situation produces the possibility that the readers' own world-view may be modified as a result of internalizing, negotiating and realizing the partially indeterminate elements of the text. Reading, according to Wolfgang Iser, gives the readers the chance to formulate the unformulated.

7 Conclusion

It can be deduced that a reader, along with her or his act of reading, functions importantly in a text after its author's absence. The reader's act of reading induces meaning from within the text. The act of reading allocates the reader's examination of the text and resists indeterminacy in it. Through the act of reading, the reader is expected to connect her or his reading experience with aspects of the text and fill in the gap in the text from her or his standpoint. Thus, the reader interprets meaning from within the text. The reader interacts with the text by using her or his imagination.

References

1. Barthes, Roland, "The Death of the Author." *Image, Music, Text*, Trans. Stephen Heath. London: Fontana, 142, (1977)
2. Barthes, Roland, "The Death of the Author." *Image, Music, Text*, Trans. Stephen Heath. London: Fontana, 145, (1977)
3. Barthes, Roland, "The Death of the Author." *Image, Music, Text*, Trans. Stephen Heath. London: Fontana, 146, (1977)
4. Barthes, Roland, "The Death of the Author." *Image, Music, Text*, Trans. Stephen Heath. London: Fontana, 148, (1977)
5. Suleiman, Susan R, and Inge Crosman, *The Reader in the Text*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 23, (1980)
6. Suleiman, Susan R, and Inge Crosman, *The Reader in the Text*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 27, (1980)
7. Iser, Wolfgang, "Indeterminacy and the Reader's Response", *Twentieth-Century Literary Theory*, Ed. K.M. Newton, New York: Palgrave, 195, (1997)
8. Iser, Wolfgang, "Indeterminacy and the Reader's Response", *Twentieth-Century Literary Theory*, Ed. K.M. Newton, New York: Palgrave, 196, (1997)
9. Iser, Wolfgang, "Indeterminacy and the Reader's Response", *Twentieth-Century Literary Theory*, Ed. K.M. Newton, New York: Palgrave, 198, (1997)
10. Iser, Wolfgang, "Interaction between Text and Reader", *The Reader in the Text*, Ed. Susan R. Suleiman and Inge Crosman, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 106, (1980)
11. Iser, Wolfgang, "Interaction between Text and Reader", *The Reader in the Text*, Ed. Susan R. Suleiman and Inge Crosman, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 112, (1980)
12. Iser, Wolfgang, "Interaction between Text and Reader", *The Reader in the Text*, Ed. Susan R. Suleiman and Inge Crosman, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 119, (1980)

13. Newton, K.M, *Twentieth-Century Literary Theory*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 187, (1997)
14. Newton, K.M, *Twentieth-Century Literary Theory*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 188, (1997)
15. Selden, Raman and Peter Widdowson, *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 49, (1993)
16. Selden, Raman and Peter Widdowson, *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 55, (1993)
17. Selden, Raman and Peter Widdowson, *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 55, (1993)
18. Selden, Raman and Peter Widdowson, *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 56, (1993)
19. Selden, Raman and Peter Widdowson, *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 57, (1993)