ISSN: 1994-4217 (Print) 2518-5586(online)

Journal of College of Education

Available online at: https://eduj.uowasit.edu.iq

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Keywords:

Umberto Eco, Model Reader, Poststructuralism, Textual Openness

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Article info

Article history:

Received 5. Aug.2026

Accepted 27. Sep.2026

Published 10. Nov.2026

The Illusion of Freedom: A Critical Examination of Umberto Eco's Model Reader in Hypertext Narratives

A B S T R A C T

The present paper critically examines Umberto Eco's concept of the "Model Reader" within his theory of poststructuralism. The freedom promised to the reader by the poststructuralist era, the present study argues, is ultimately illusory. While Eco suggests that literary texts allow for multiple, but not unlimited, interpretations through the route of an ideal reader, the study opposes the idea that such a framework of the model reader finely redefines the authorial limits and control. Methodologically, the current study employs a qualitative analysis method that combines theoretical criticism with textual narrative analysis. The study exploits the critical viewpoints of the three poststructuralist thinkers: Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault. These three analytical frameworks are used to examine and challenge Umberto Eco's concept of the Model Reader. The methodology is also supported by analyzing two hypertext novels: Michael Joyce's Afternoon, a Story (1987) and Shelley Jackson's Patchwork Girl (1995). Results showed that Eco's Model Reader presupposed limitations rather than true or totally freedom. These limitations are being ruled by the textual regulations and authorial authority.

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.31185/eduj.Vol65.Iss1.5507

وهم الحرية: دراسة نقدية للقارئ النموذجي عند أمبرتو إيكو في السرديات التشعبية

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المستخلص

يتناول البحث الحالي بالدراسة النقدية مفهوم القارئ النموذجي عند أمبرتو إيكو ضمن نظريته في ما بعد البنيوية . ويحاو البحث ان يثبت بأن الحرية التي وعد بها عصر ما بعد البنيوية للقارئ ليست، في نهاية المطاف، سوى وهم .فبينما يرى إيكو أن النصوص الأدبية تتيح تعددًا في التأويلات، وإن كان هذا التعدد غير مطلق، من خلال القارئ المثالي أو

النموذجي، يعارض هذا البحث فكرة أن إطار القارئ النموذجي يمنح القارئ حرية تأويلية حقيقية، إذ يعيد بصورة دقيقة إنتاج الحدود والضوابط وسلطة المؤلف.

ومن الناحية المنهجية، يعتمد البحث الحالي المنهج التحليلي النوعي الذي يجمع بين النقد النظري والتحليل السردي للنصوص. ويوظف البحث الرؤى النقدية لثلاثة من أبرز مفكري ما بعد البنيوية، وهم :رولان بارت، وجاك دريدا، وميشيل فوكو .وتُستخدم هذه الأطر التحليلية الثلاثة لفحص مفهوم أمبرتو إيكو عن القارئ النموذجي وتحديه نقديًا. كما تدعم المنهجيةَ دراسةُ روايتين تشعبيتين، هما (1987) Afternoon, a Story :لمايكل جويس، و (1995) Patchwork Girl لشِلي جاكسون. وأظهرت النتائج أن مفهوم إيكو عن القارئ النموذجي يفترض وجود قيود أكثر مما يفترض حرية حقيقية أو مطلقة. وهذه القيود تخضع للضوابط النصية وسلطة المؤلف، الأمر الذي يجعل حرية القارئ في التأويل حرية محدودة وموجهة داخل إطار يحدده النص والمؤلف.

الكلمات المفتاحية :أمبرتو إيكو، القارئ النموذجي ، ما بعد البنيوية ، انفتاحيه النص.

Introduction

The relationship between author, text, and reader is the most debatable issue in contemporary critical theory. Within this framework of the poststructural era, a significant question may be raised about the extent to which readers are free to create meaning independently of authorial limitations. The tension between the open strategy and the limitation forms the core theoretical problem that the present study tries to deal with. One of the most influential poststructural thinkers is Umberto Eco, who introduces a special reader for any text, though Eco simultaneously acknowledges the plurality of interpretations. In other words, these interpretations, for him, must remain within the boundaries established by the textual and authorial authorities.

Umberto Eco occupies a central position in this study. As a novelist and theorist, Eco introduced a new literary interpretation by presenting frameworks for understanding the dynamic relationship among the three components: the text, the author, and the reader. In his influential works such as *The Role of the Reader* (1979), *The Limits of Interpretation* (Eco, 1990), and *Interpretation and Overinterpretation* (1992), Eco offers an inexpressible balance between textual openness and meaning stability. His concept of the "openness" is essential to postmodern semiotic thought. It suggests that texts encourage meaning multiplicity. However, this is fulfilled within rational and authorial prearranged limits, as it is named by Eco as the "Model Reader". The notion of the "Model reader" is a competent and cooperative reader whom the author indirectly designs the text for, and who becomes the cornerstone of the narrative domain.

The current problem between the reader and the author has attracted the attention of different scholars. Valentina Pisanty, for instance, in his article "From the Model Reader to the Limits of Interpretation" (2015), discussed Eco's concept of the Model Reader to his later emphasis on the interpretation and overinterpretation. This article also emphasizes the reader's active role in producing meaning. The article also maintains that interpretation must remain within the textual structure only (*intentio operis*). In another article by Luis Alfonso Argüello Guzmán, "El lector modelo: Umberto Eco" (2020), which explains the development

of Eco's concept of the Model Reader from *The Open Work* to *The Role of the Reader*. The article explores the relationship between authorial intention, textual intention, and the reader's intention. It argues that meaning develops through the interaction between text and reader rather than independently. One more article written by Lamija Kršić, "Umberto Eco: Freedom and the Limits of Artwork Interpretation" (2017), in which the author directly addresses the tension of freedom and the limits of interpretation in Eco's theory. However, these previous studies mainly discussed Eco's own theoretical framework and did not relate the Model Reader to some poststructural critiques, such as Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault. Furthermore, on the practical side, these previous studies do not investigate the tensions between the model reader and authorial control in contemporary hypertext fiction. So, the current study addresses this gap by combining poststructuralist critiques of Eco's Model Reader with textual analyses of the hypertext fictions of Michael Joyce's *Afternoon, a Story* and Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl*, showing how apparently reader freedom remains structured by underlying textual and authorial limits.

The present study assumes that the idea of Eco's Model Reader, though it establishes a regulated framework of interpretation, does not form a basis for the reader's freedom; instead, it again imprisons the reader within the author's limitations. A literary text may appear open to multiple interpretations, but the range of these interpretations remains limited by certain strategies embedded within the process of reading given by the authorship. So, this is more limited than what has been suggested by Eco concerning the Model reader. The so-called freedom of interpretation is, therefore, a form of "disciplined liberty" which is a domain where interpretive ways are possible but restricted by the text's structural and historical principles. In essence, Eco's Model Reader, as Peter Bondanella (2005) demonstrates, exists not to liberate interpretation but to subtly channel it toward authorially approved effects.

A qualitative analysis approach is being employed as a methodology, which combines the theoretical criticism with textual narrative analysis. The theoretical part of the study is mainly based on poststructural critical viewpoints of Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault. These three views are used to examine and challenge Eco's concept of the "Model Reader". The three critics were selected because of their influential critiques of the authorial dominance, which form the main arguments underlying Eco's concept.

The theoretical analysis begins with Roland Barthes. Barthes rejects the power of authorial dominance and situates meaning within the reader's understanding. Barthes claims that "a text's unity lies not in its destination but in its origin" (Barthes, 1977, p. 148), which serves as a basis for questioning Eco's assertion on interpretive limits. The study next employs Jacques Derrida's concept of "*différance*" to examine Eco's attempt to control interpretation through textual boundaries. Derrida's view is that meaning within the text is continually deferred and not fixed. This also challenges Eco's notion that interpretation can be limited within stable semantic boundaries. Michel Foucault's concept of the author-function, further developed in "What Is an Author?" (1977), is a framework on how the Model Reader operates as a mechanism of interpretive rules that privileges certain readings and excludes others.

In supporting the theoretical discussion, the present study presents a practical analysis of two hypertext narrative stories: Michael Joyce's *Afternoon, a Story* (1987) and Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl* (1995). The reason behind selecting these two texts is that they are the widely known examples of hypertext fiction in the poststructuralist era, as they explicitly promote the reader's interaction with the texts. Particular attention will be paid to the reader freedom/ conservative in the two fictional stories addressed. By talking about these three poststructuralist critiques along with the analysis of the two hypertext fictions, the current study examines whether Eco's notions of Model Reader and openness. The study also evaluates the relevance and limitations of Eco's Model Reader in traditional literary theory and the contemporary digital narratives.

Eco's Theory: Model Reader and Openness

In his works, *Lector in fabula* and *The Role of the Reader (1979)*, *The Limits of Interpretation (1990)*, *Interpretation and Overinterpretation (1992)*, and *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods (1994)*. Umberto Eco's main focus is meaning and interpretation. In these works, Eco develops and introduces aspects of textual interpretation that emphasize the relationship between the reader and the text. He pays particular attention to the various interpretative limits imposed by the text on the reader. According to Eco, the interpretation of a text is stuck in the interplay between textual openness and the limits of interpretation. Central to this interpretation is Eco's concept of the "Model Reader", who plays as an authorized meaning agent implicitly assigned by the author during the process of textual reading. According to Eco's (1979) essay *The Role of the Reader*, the model reader is "a textual strategy" rather than an actual individual. Model reader, then refers to the proposed reader who possesses the needed competence and cultural awareness to decipher the meanings embedded within a text. This reader is expected to work together with the author in filling the gaps without exceeding the boundaries of acceptable meaning.

Eco's idea of openness is the arena in which the Model Reader operates, a term is borrowed from aesthetics and uses in literary terms. In his work *The Open Work*, Eco (1989) argues that modern and postmodern texts allow for different and multiple readings and do not impose a fixed interpretation. Such works are "open" not because they lack meaning, but because they invite the reader to participate in generating more meanings. However, Eco insists that openness must not be confused with unlimited interpretive freedom. The author, through textual structures, defines a space or reading within which interpretive acts are permitted. As Eco (1990) later states, "to say that a text has many interpretations does not mean that every interpretation is valid" (p. 21). And this seems against the text-openness framework.

Central to the above openness is the paradox of such model. While supporting openness, Eco's Model Reader simultaneously enforces limits on the reader's possible explanation range. Model Readers, therefore, are not permitted to interpret arbitrarily. They are, instead, subtly guided by some rules related to textual structures and authorial limits toward acceptable meanings. For instance, Eco's (1992) criticism of interpretation and overinterpretation in which readers impose external meanings not supported by the text. This

reveals his anxiety about extreme interpretive freedom. He argues that texts have an "intentio operis," or intention of the work, which must be respected (Eco, 1992, p. 64).

One more thing related to Eco's Model Reader is the construction of that reader in terms of the reader's cultural and intellectual competence. This specific kind of ideal reader is discussed in Eco's work *The Name of the Rose* (1983). According to Eco readers, in order to get the meaning of this work, there must be enough knowledge, for example, history, semiotics, theology, and some other references in the text. The model reader is not just a recipient agent, however he/she is highly specialized to this exact type of text. So, this demand from a sense of elitism in reading was created by Eco's theory of the ideal reader. As Bondanella points out, only those readers who have been equipped with special skills can engage with the text, whereas others are marginalized and excluded from participation in generating meaning (2005). The reader is, then, not free to create meaning, but is placed within a net of structures designed to direct his/her interpretation along certain or limited paths.

The Problem of Control in the "Open Work"

In the open work, the concept of "openness" remains significant for its powerful tool in the hand of the writer to leave the arrangement of some constituents of a work to the reader. It is also striking for its anticipating of novel themes through the elements of "multiplicity" and "plurality" in art and the insistence on literary response as an interactive process between text and reader. Umberto Eco's theoretical writings, therefore are meant for the interpretation of plurality through the concept of the open work. His poststructural fiction reveals an underlying tension between textual freedom and authorial control.

Again in Eco's novel *The Name of the Rose* (1983), the work is rich with intertextual and philosophical complexity. Apparently, the novel reflects the author's intention of openness, however it invites readers to think deeply to understand issues related to medieval mystery that are hidden by references to issues related to theology and history. The process of getting deep meaning seems highly selective, as it demands a skillful reader with special abilities that help the reader to narrow the set of possible interpretations. The style of the novel is also constructed to have fully encoded references, such as Latin quotations and references to canonical philosophers. To navigate this complex web of relations between the text and its hidden meaning, the author expects a reader to have special qualifications. A reader in this sense is not only a passive agent, but must be pre-equipped with highly educated knowledge and intertextual awareness. As Eco writes, "the author has to foresee a model reader supposedly able to deal interpretively with the expressions in the same way as the author deals generatively with them." (Eco, 1979, p. 7) According to this perspective, the text appears open, however, its meaning requires a very specific interpretive skill, which excludes the inexperienced or non-academic reader.

The above textual strategy, on the other hand, plays a part in authorial intentionalism. This authorial intentionalism is the hermeneutical view that an author's intentions should constrain how a text is properly interpreted. So, the reader must understand what intention that the author is trying to communicate to their audience. The authorial intentionalism acknowledges that this can apply only when what the author intends to convey can actually be conveyed by

the language that they use in the text. If an author uses words that cannot, by any reasonable interpretation, possibly mean what they intend, then the work is simply meaningless. By embedding these textual strategies with layers of specialized knowledge, the author implicitly dictates the kind of reader who can engage meaningfully with the text. Turning to Eco's Model Reader, Bondanella (2005) argues that the myth of openness in Eco's work of fiction often covers a carefully achieved interpretive process designed to reward only a particular class of reader (the reader whom the author intended). Through this framework, textual relations are understood as closed, in which interpretive liberty is restricted by those structures.

One more aspect that supports the limitation of meaning is the novel's metafictional technique. Metafiction is a fiction that self-consciously addresses its own status as a story or narrative. It uses techniques that reveal the artificiality of the text, the author's role, and the reader's experience. This places both the author and the reader as master manipulators of interpretive signals. In effect, Eco's open text becomes a puzzle rather than an open arena. It is an invitation for exploration, whereas it finally guides the reader through prearranged paths.

Barthes: Death of the Author vs. Eco's Ghost of the Author

A revolutionary turn in literary theory is introduced with Roland Barthes's publication of "The Death of the Author" (1977). Barthes argues that the birth of the reader must come at the cost of the author's authority. He asserts that a text's meaning does not exist in the author's intentions but emerges through the reader's engagement with what he/she reads. Barthes (1997) adds that "writing posits ceaselessly meaning ceaselessly to evaporate it" (p. 147), which emphasizes that interpretation belongs to the reader, not to the author. This essential vision deconstructs the traditional arrangement of authorship and frees the reader from interpretive limits.

Umberto Eco's model reader concept, however, appears to redefine the author who has been killed by Barthes, at least in a more refined and theoretical form. Through the model reader, Eco restores a kind of authorial presence that Barthes emphasized removing. Although Eco does not advocate for a singular authoritative reading, he insists on a cooperative and competent reader who decodes the "intentio operis" (intention of the work). In this way, Eco implies that the author's design still governs interpretation space (Eco, 1990). Eco here replaces the authoritative author with a textual designer who builds structures that only a certain kind of reader can navigate.

A basic philosophical departure about the ontology of meaning is at the centre of the argument between Barthes and Eco. From a poststructuralist point of view, Barthes views the text as a place of limitless play in which reading itself creates meaning rather than fixing it. His idea is consistent with Derrida's "différance", which holds that meaning is never fully present and is always postponed. According to this plan, the author is only a mediator of language systems rather than a source of a unique meaning.

Eco, on the other hand, discusses the semiotic framework that acknowledges the unpredictable nature of signs, which opposes the complete failure of textual bounds. By

putting out the “intentio operis”, Eco argues that although texts are free, they have limits and boundaries. He presents a hermeneutic ethics, which holds the reader accountable for honouring the author's semiotic structure. Apparently, the chaotic consequences of Barthes’s radical transparency seem to be against Eco’s concept. This philosophical conflict involves two forms of interpretive responsibility, more than just authorial presence or absence. One emphasizes restriction, and the other values freedom. Eco thus views the possibility of interpretive nihilism in Barthes's framework and uses his “ghost” of the creator as a required remedy.

Barthes-Eco's argument seems to be deeply felt in recognized and instructional literary interpretation practices done by the reader. By making each reader a co-creator of textual fabric, Barthes' concept of the open reader proposes a freedom of meaning. This has permitted resistant readings, especially in feminist, postcolonial, and queer theory, and reinforced varied readings and critical thinking in educational settings. The loss of authorial intent makes it possible for the subjectivity of the reader to become a major participant in text analysis and meaning.

However, Eco's model serves as a warning framework, mainly in fields where it is necessary to defend interpretative validity. Eco’s focus on the "model reader" forms a standard for reader proficiency. The model rejects interpretations that challenge textual logic or interrupt the narrative structure's internal unity. For Eco not all interpretations are equal or valid, however some interpretations seem overinterpretation. The tension between interpretation and overinterpretation forms the modern thinking, in which a balance must be between reader action and interpretive limits. In this regard, Eco’s ghost of the author is not only theoretical but practical. The author is a controlling mechanism of acceptable meaning in ways that Barthes’s reader will not.

This process, of course, comes in contrary to Barthes’s view of pluralism and interpretive freedom. While Barthes killed the author to authorize the reader, Eco installs the model reader to keep textual coherence and resist overinterpretive randomness. The result is a theoretical paradox, in which Eco’s author does not disappear but returns as a ghost. This ghost is a guiding force that certifies readers stay within the meaning limits the author has already made.

Derrida: The Inescapability of Infinite Meaning

One more thing related to Eco’s Model Reader is Jacques Derrida’s theory of *différance*. The theory plays a direct challenge to Umberto Eco’s attempt to limit interpretation by the concept of the ideal reader. One of the most important issue in Derrida’s theory is the instability of language in which meaning is delayed. For Derrida, meaning is always deferred and dependent on the endless interaction of signs (the relation between signifier and signified). So, the postponement of meaning suggests multiplicity of readings. As Derrida writes, “there is no transcendental or privileged signified, and that the domain or play of signification henceforth has no limit, one must reject even the concept and word sign itself” (1978, p. 354). This challenges the notion that texts can possess a stable internal logic or even that interpretation can be limited to boundaries set by the author’s authority.

In contrast, Eco's perspective seeks to contain meaning within what he calls the "intentio operis". The "intentio operis" is what the work is about. Eco argues that texts are open to multiple interpretations, yet not all readings are valid (Eco, 1990, p.4). The model reader is then designed to unfold these intended meanings accurately, thereby avoiding overinterpretation. Yet, Derrida adds that such control is not real because language slips away from fixed meaning and no system of signs can fully stabilize for any interpretation or meaning.

Under Derrida's views, Eco's boundaries begin to collapse. The signs, which Eco used to express his model reader, are themselves unstable. This undermines the coherence of Eco's "intentio operis." And this is an attempt to manage interpretation, which only reveals the futility of resisting the infinite meaning play of signification. In this sense, Eco's effort to stabilize openness with control becomes an impossible task, in which deconstruction is exposed as inherently contradictory (Norris, 2002).

The ethical uncertainty of the meaning power of the reader is among the most important consequences of Derrida's deconstruction theory. Essentially, he removes the idea of a final or privileged reading, or specifically model reader, by claiming that meaning is extremely deferred and that the center of meaning can never be set in the time of reading. According to Derrida, any attempt to manipulate meaning in the way that the model reader getting meaning, is unethical as it reveals a logocentric need for mastery and stability. For him, this is another sign of the rooted centric prejudice that tries to reduce the free play of language. Eco's concept of "overinterpretation" is, therefore, and according to Derrida, seen as an ethical risk. It is evidence of the reader's openness to the undecidability essential in all signification, rather than as an extra that should be restricted. The ethical reader is, then a deconstructive reader, one who hangs authority and engages with the randomness of meaning without seeking to dominate it, rather than the competent model reader.

So, Derrida rejects fixed meaning, but his criticism does more than question the author. However, it shifts the author's standing in the endless game of signs. This provides a complex substitute for both Eco's uncertain re-presence of the author's intention and Barthes's death of the author. For Derrida, the author is a trace of "différance" within the textual domain rather than being totally present or absent. Within the structure of language, and according to Derrida, the author becomes a name, a function that can be interrupted, postponed, or cited. Even the author must be viewed as a textual construct rather than the source of the text since, as Derrida states that, "there is nothing outside the text" (1976, p. 215). While Eco aims to construct an organized openness, Derrida's philosophy reveals that structure itself is always already compromised by the indirectness of language. The result is that the model reader is imprisoned in an endless delay of meaning. He is trapped in the very openness Eco attempts to regulate.

Foucault: The Model Reader as Disciplinary Mechanism

Another powerful critique of Eco's Model Reader is supported by Michel Foucault's theory of the "author function" and disciplinary power, by placing interpretation within broader structures of institutional control. In his essay *What is an Author?* (1977), Foucault explores the complex interplay between text and authorship. He argues that the author is not

the main source of meaning in a text but a functional principle that shapes the interpretations around it. This perspective motivates a re-evaluation of how texts are understood and the role of the author within cultural narratives. The author's name, Foucault claims, acts as an authority that restricts and organizes texts. This determines which interpretations are real and which are excluded. Through this way, Eco's Model Reader can be seen not as a neutral agent but as a product of established knowledge, who is bounded by cultural and ideological beliefs.

Eco's, on the other hand, emphasizes that any meaning must be supported with a clear intention, which indirectly reinforces the author's controlling role. The model reader, for Eco, is designed to read wisely and to cooperate with the text's encoded signals. However, this helpful reading is not unstructured; it requires a special type of reader who is educated in the different discourses that define interpretive validity. As such, the model reader becomes an assumed mechanism of discipline, reflecting Foucault's concept of power as productive and self-regulating rather than merely repressive (Foucault, 1979). In Foucault's opinion, the model reader plays as a disciplinary figure who displays and polices their own reading ways according to the norms, symbols, and instructions embedded within the text. This supports Foucault's view that texts and literary criticism train and teach readers to follow specific modes of thought. Eco's reader, then, is not a free agent but a subject framed by systems of power that dictate what counts as appropriate and suitable interpretation.

Foucault's theory of discourse frames the exact circumstances in which meaning is created and distributed according to knowledge and power. It reveals how interpretive authority is a part of a broader discursive system when it is applied by Eco's model reader. The notion that the "intentio operis" must be decoded by the model reader presupposes that the text already has a right reading. According to Foucault, however, texts and the readers who interact with them do not exist apart or separated from discourse forms that pre-structure what may be spoken and read in a particular episteme (Foucault, 1977, p. 124).

Eco's notion of cooperative reading thus reflects a **"**discursive economy" in which interpretive legitimacy is not neutral but is historically and institutionally produced. The reader is not decoding meaning from a purely semiotic structure but is performing an authorized interpretive act that reinforces the dominant values of literary institutions (Eco, 1992, pp. 63–64). These values determine which readings are sanctioned and which are dismissed as aberrant or excessive. In this context, the model reader does not discover meaning; they reproduce a discursively conditioned reading, trained by academic norms, critical theory, and ideological expectations.

The above process makes the model reader an epistemic discipline tool, to use Foucauldian terminology. The schools that educate students to read "properly" already dictate too much of what they read. In this context, what Eco refers to as "overinterpretation" turns out to be a failure of disciplinary conformity, which is a departure from the interpretive norms imposed by knowledge-power structures, rather than of logic or textual design (1992, p. 64).

The question of how Eco's model reader functions as a self-surveilling subject within the literary system requires a particular understanding of Foucault's study of the "panopticon" in *Discipline and Punish* (1979). According to Eco's theory, the ideal reader influences both textual indications and the self-control necessary to refrain from overinterpreting. This internalization is similar to the panoptic mechanism in that the reader regulates their own interpretations while the author-function or critical institution is fictitiously watching. For Foucault, the "intentio operis" becomes an omen presence, rather than only producing a framework for guidance. Eco's model reader, on the other hand, preserves interpretative discipline by predicting what the author or institution expects. The model reader is much like the watchful who guarantees obedience through self-monitoring.

Furthermore, Eco's model reader highlights that interpretive legitimacy is never neutral but determined by the structures that define critical authority. The reader becomes, in this light, a "textual subject". In other words, the reader is an interpreter shaped by certain rules of knowledge that privilege some readings while excluding others. Eco's model reader is a technological consequence of disciplinary modernity. He is like an instrument that infuses authority and institutional power into the act of reading itself, rather than just a creation of interpretive idealism. Thus, far from liberating the reader, Eco's model reader becomes a subtle tool of control. The reader is an idealized figure shaped by the very institutional forces that postmodern theory often seeks to critique.

Eco's Model Reader and the Illusion of Plural Meaning

In Eco's theory of the model reader, the reading process is seen as a way of fostering interpretive cooperation, in which the subject ultimately acts as a regulating force on the series of acceptable meanings in a text. This is an arena of a set of possible meanings. In the first spot, Eco's reading perspective appears to support interpretive openness, specifically in his works, *The Role of the Reader* (1979) and *The Limits of Interpretation* (1990). In these works, Eco emphasizes that texts presupposed multiple readings. He, however, insists that these readings must occur within textual and structural limitations, intended by the author, and available only and specifically to the specific kind of reader (not any reading). This kind of reader, in Eco's theory, is not a passive consumer but an active participant. The reader is capable of recognizing and responding to the complex meaning relations embedded and encoded in the text. As Eco (1979) states, "a text is a machine conceived for eliciting interpretations" (p. 3). However, not all interpretations are equally valid, but only those expected or given by the author and available to the model reader are valid.

Implicitly, any aside and alternative readings are being excluded in Eco's Model Reader. An informative elitism is being established by Eco's theory, in which it favors a reader who has enough knowledge in cultural, historical, and textual literary contexts. Thus, the idea of Eco's openness is criticized and undermined by the constituents that apparently supported it. As Bondanella (2005) notes, Eco's work often gives the illusion of freedom while reinforcing logical boundaries that only a select readership can get. Meaning therefore, becomes accessible only to those who have the characteristics of the model reader, who is in turn effectively narrows the space of interpretation.

Furthermore, the notion of the Model Reader challenges poststructuralist claims that meaning is inherently unstable and reader-generated. Roland Barthes's (1977) theory of "The Death of the Author", for example, places the reader as the primary agent of meaning, who melts the authority of the author and embraces textual multiplicity. Eco, on the other hand, attempts to retain a spirit of authorial control through the model reader. A reader who must cooperate with the embedded intent of the work (Eco, 1990). Jacques Derrida's (1978) theory of *différance* further problematizes Eco's stance on the ground that meaning is never fixed, but always deferred and constantly shifting through language. In light of Derrida's critique, Eco's model appears less like an independent invitation to interpret and more like a map with predefined ways that one must follow to achieve textual coherence.

From Theory to Practice: Hypertext Fiction and the Model Reader

In the 1960s, the term hypertext was first coined by Ted Nelson. Nelson explains the term "text that branches and allows choices to the reader, best read at an interactive screen." (Nelson 1993:0/2) The Web is a wide hypertext, consisting of many separate but interlinked pages. Those web pages are electronic documents that can contain text, images, sound, video, and programs. By clicking on these words or links, the reader activates or follows a link, thereby moving to a new Web page on the screen. In this way, the hypertext branches according to the links the reader chooses to follow, as in Nelson's words above. The close readings that do exist in the present study are mostly of hypertext fictions, and especially of Michael Joyce's classic Afternoon, a Story and Shelley Jackson's Patchwork Girl.

Michael Joyce's *Afternoon, a Story* (1987)

A widely recognized hypertext novel is Michael Joyce's *Afternoon, a Story* (1987). It is the first work of hypertext fiction and a milestone in the development of electronic literature. At the core of its analysis, the novel challenged traditional linear storytelling by allowing readers to navigate and move through interconnected lexias through hyperlinks. Unlike the conventional printed novel, *Afternoon, a Story* has no fixed sequence or linear order of events. What determines the sequence is the reader, who encounters textual fragments that produce different narrative experiences with every single reading. This nonlinear structure initially appears to provide readers with unprecedented interpretive freedom. This type of reading makes the work a typical example of postmodern textual openness. Nicholas C. Burbules argues that "links create significations" and should be understood as rhetorical moves, not read uncritically as "the neutral medium of passing from point A to point B. (1998, p. 110). Links influence our interpretation of the pages they connect:

> links change the way in which material is read and understood: partly due to the mere juxtaposition of the two related texts (how will a jump from a page on teenage drug-use statistics to a page on rock music affect how the music page is read?; and partly by the implied connection that a link expresses. (p.105)

Joyce's hypertext novel, at first point, seems to go with Roland Barthes's birth of the reader. According to Barthes, meaning is produced through the reader's active engagement rather than being dictated by authorial authority (Barthes, 1977). Readers choose among multiple hyperlinks, revisiting lexias and navigating new narrative paths. George P. Landow (2006), one of the foremost theorists of hypertext, argues that hypertext "reconfigures notions of author, text, and reader, writer, intellectual property, and other matters of immediate concern to those who design hypertext systems or author documents with them" (p. 211). Landow, along with Barthes, suggests that readers become active participants in constructing the narrative rather than passive consumers. Such characteristics seem to embody the poststructuralist celebration of textual plurality and freedom of meaning. At the beginning Joyce's *Afternoon, a Story* (1987), the reader is given a kind of freedom through the way the central dilemma of the novel is introduced. It seems that the reader does not have full information when Peter says: "I want to say I may have seen my son die this morning" (Joyce, 1987). The reader does not even know what happened to peter's son and his ex-wife. However, later in the novel gives the reader information about the accident through different hints. The narrator then explains the situation: "By five the sun sets and the afternoon melt freezes again across the blacktop into crystal octopi and palms of ice-- rivers and continents beset by fear, and we walk out to the car, the snow moaning beneath our boots..." (Joyce, 1987). This is what the author tells the reader.

With the selection of hyperlinks, a closer examination of the whole story of the novel reveals that this seeming freedom is basically forced by the author's design. Although readers choose, from the links provided by the digital text, their own pathways, every hyperlink and possible sequence has already been anticipated and programmed by the author himself (Joyce). For example, one documented screen shows the reader a "Choose a link" menu with alternatives such as: "Jung → signify J", "gynecologist → orchis", "womb reamed → womb reamed", "Wert's contention → Checker","yes → yes3" (Joyce, 2018). The reader is unable to create new textual connections or meaning outside those inserted clues within the hypertext structures. As Umberto Eco (1979) observes, a text is "a machine for producing possible worlds" (p. 246). In *The Limits of Interpretation* (1990), Eco also argues that literary texts encourage plurality of meanings while at the same time imposing limits on those interpretations. As he writes, "to say that a text potentially has no end of interpretations does not mean that every act of interpretation has a happy ending" (p. 6). Thus, textual openness does not go with unlimited interpretive freedom, but instead it is regulated by structures embedded within the work itself.

Michael Joyce's *Afternoon, a Story* introduces this paradox via its hypertextual structure. Again with the same example above the novel opens with the disturbing statement, "I want to say I may have seen my son die this morning." (Joyce, 1987). Rather than solving this statement through a single narrative bath, the work invites the reader with multiple lexias. Each one offers fragmented memories, inconsistent perspectives, and incomplete explanations. Readers must choose which hyperlink to follow, giving the impression that they are constructing their own private narrative. Every link, nevertheless, has already been designed by the author. The reader is therefore free only to select among authorial predetermined possible paths.

The instability of closure is also emphasized by Joyce himself throughout the novel. As the narrator explains, “Closure is, as in any fiction, a suspect quality” (Joyce, 1987). This type of closure appears to undermine the possibility of a single convincing and final ending. It does not imply unlimited narrative freedom. Instead, the absence of definitive closure is itself a textual strategy introduced by the novelist. Within any literary text, the reader may encounter different narrative routes, but he does not escape the limited configuration established by the author. It’s a reader who hunts the mind of the author, whom the author builds as he/she writes a story. This model reader will help the author decide how much detail is required in their work, so that skilled readers can understand the text.

The relationship between the reader and the text is further explained in Espen Aarseth's concept of “ergodic literature”. In cybertext, Aarseth examines the aesthetics and textual dynamics of digital literature and various genres such as hypertext fiction, computer games, computer-generated poetry, and prose. So, in getting meaning, the reader must perform specific actions to generate a literary interpretation, and these actions must be serious. Concerning the novel *Afternoon: a Story,* Aarseth (1997) argues that such a novel requires “nontrivial effort to allow the reader to traverse the text.” (p. 1) For Aarseth, the reader must dynamically choose links and rebuild fragmented narrative patterns. Yet this effort should not be connected with unlimited and open text. Instead, the reader makes non-trivial actions that have already been anticipated by the textual structure. The reader is here introduced with some hidden links embedded within the lexias. The reader must then experiment by selecting a particular word to find the suitable link that leads to the right lexia. So all these navigation are bounded by the authority of the writer. The reader, moreover can also proceed the story by using the “Yes” and “No” buttons at the bottom of the screen. These choices will lead the reader to different route with different meaning, but again all the routes and meaning were predesigned by the author.

The hypertext, therefore, transforms the reader into an active participant rather than a traditional creator of meaning. So, the novel, *Afternoon: A Story,* provides substantial evidence for the main paradox that is identified in Eco's theory of the Model Reader. Apparently, the novel gives freedom to readers through nonlinear searching links, but the freedom is carefully planned by the textual structures and the author. The novel, therefore, critiques the concept of absolute freedom, since everything is predetermined by the author and the text.

Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl* (1995)

The second example of the hypertext work to be discussed in the present study *is Patchwork Girl* (1995). It was a famous work of electronic literature by American author Shelley Jackson. It was written in the Storyspace hypertext system and often discussed along with Michael Joyce's *Afternoon*, *a Story* as an important work of hypertext fiction. The novel is a strong literary example to support the critique of Eco’s model reader, because it is not merely a hypertext novel but also a theoretical reflection on author- reader organization. This hypertext novel represents a parody of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* by imagining that Victor Frankenstein's female creature survived and narrates her own history. Rather than presenting a conventional linear narrative, Jackson constructs the novel as a network of interconnected links and lexias via which readers navigate and move forward by selecting those hyperlinks.

Every reading follows a different direction that encourages readers to collect the creature's fragmented identity from isolated textual pieces. The novel therefore appears to exemplify postmodern openness of meaning and the reader's freedom.

Jackson, consequently, focuses on the style of fragmentation as the shaping principle of both body and narrative. In the beginning of the novel, the narrator declares: "I am made up of a multiplicity of anonymous girls" (Jackson, 1995). This statement is considered as a description of the monster's body and of the hypertext itself. The narrative consists of disconnected textual fragments that readers must fold into temporary configurations. Identity is therefore signified not as a unified whole but as an assemblage produced through reading.

The novel repeatedly reinforces this metaphor of textual gathering. The narrator clarifies, "I am stitched together from many bodies" (Jackson, 1995). The patchwork body becomes an explicit metaphor for hypertextual composition. Every lexia looks like one of the creature's bodily fragments, and hyperlinks operate as stitches connecting the separated textual pieces. Readers actively participate in constructing narrative coherence by deciding which route to follow. As George P. Landow (2006) argues, hypertext shifts reading into an act of navigation in which readers "the functions of reader and writer become more deeply entwined with each other than ever before" (p. 125). On the surface, therefore, *Patchwork Girl* appears to realize Roland Barthes's ideal of the liberated reader. However, this apparent freedom experienced by the reader remains determined and structured by the authorial design. Although the reader chooses the route him/herself, the reader cannot produce new text or hypertext beyond that designed by the author. As Eco (1979) argues that, "a text is a machine conceived for producing its model reader" (p.7), *Patchwork Girl* represents this process solely. The fragmentations of the creature are connected through the body the text. It becomes clear when the creature admits that "My real skeleton is made of scars: a web that traverses me in three dimensions. What holds me together is what marks my dispersal. I am most myself in the gaps between my parts" (Jackson, 1995). There is an analogy between the parts and hyperlinks that connects separate lexias. Through this it seems that the reader enjoys unlimited paths or activities, however, he is working within the network designed by the authority of the text.

Jackson herself explicitly reflects upon the above connection between bodies and texts. One of the novel's most frequently repeated lines of observation states, "The body is a patchwork, though the stitches might not show" (Jackson, 1995). This perception extends beyond physical example to encompass textual construction.

Another example of critiquing Eco's Model Reader is that the reader cannot see the whole text immediately. The narrator claims: "Assembling these patched words in an electronic space, I feel half-blind, as if the entire text is within reach, but because of some myopic condition I am only familiar with in dreams, I can see only that part most immediately before me, and have no sense of how that part relates to all the rest." (Jackson, 1995) This directly supports that the reader does not have freedom of the whole textual structure.

Every narrative connection appears natural only because the author has concealed the underlying structure linking individual lexias. From a wider theoretical standpoint,

Patchwork Girl demonstrates that hypertext does not remove authorial control but moves it within the design of the textual network itself. Readers will construct meaning by assembling fragments and navigating alternative routes.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the present study has argued that, in spite of its emphasis on textual openness, Umberto Eco's concept of the Model Reader imposed major limits on understanding and freedom. Although Eco emphasized that the text suggests diversity of interpretations, he at the same time put limitations and rules on those interpretations through the concepts of the "intentio operis" and the Model Reader, and hence imposed an authorial control over freedom. In the theoretical part, the present study examined three major critiques of Umberto Eco's concept of the Model Reader. The discussion of the three critiques revealed that Eco's openness of interpretation is more regulated by the authorial control than genuinely free. Barthes, for example, challenged the continued presence of authorial presence, Derrida emphasized the instability and endless deferral of meaning, while Foucault showed how interpretation is shaped by broader structures of discourse and power. To support the argument, two hypertext fictions were closely examined, particularly Michael Joyce's *Afternoon, a Story,* and Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl*. These works appear to authorize readers through nonlinear navigation and multiple pathways of interpretations; however, the possible choices remain predetermined by the author. Reader contribution is therefore encouraged, but only within boundaries already encoded or given in the text. The present study concluded that the freedom of Eco's Model Reader is only an illusion, demonstrating the tension between the plurality of the reader's interpretations and authorial authority that shaped the contemporary literary and digital fiction.

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